

## Fighting armistice by oviparous

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Aged-Up Character(s), Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Amnesia, F/M, Friendship, LGBTQ Character, Memory Loss, Mother-Daughter Relationship, Mystery, Post-S1, Romance, What-If

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Barb's Mother, Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Mike Wheeler, Original Characters, Shawn Levy, Terry Ives, The Duffer Brothers, Troy's Mother, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Eleven/Mike Wheeler

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**Warnings:** No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 17

**Words:** 69,547

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**Summary:**

It's been 15 years since Eleven disappeared after taking down the Demogorgon. Mike is 27 and a successful entrepreneur, and when he travels to Tokyo to negotiate a contract for his gaming company, he meets his interpreter--who looks exactly like Eleven, amongst other coincidences. Funny thing is, she doesn't seem to recognise Mike.

A story told in multiple POVs.

(Warning: British spelling/expression/punctuation conventions, original characters.)

[Chapter 16 and 17 added, have fun]

## 1. El - Meeting Mike Wheeler

### Author's Note:

I decided to post this as I write--I really hope I don't regret this decision! I usually finish up my entire fic before I post, but I haven't written anything for Stranger Things before, so I knew the only way to commit to finishing this piece of writing was to post. There's not gonna be a lot of hardcore fluff--just two adults falling in love with each other and huge chunks of story dedicated to my OCs and army of minor characters who help advance the mystery. Kudos = encouragement, and comments are love!

### El

The client had changed his itinerary twice; that's how the project had come to El, since Simon had to interpret for the IBM guys (who used a lot of jargon so seriously, only Simon was equipped to handle it, thank God he used to be a programmer) and her schedule was open that week. El didn't mind; she desperately wanted to make up for all the time she'd been sick.

It'd been a headache, an awful one that lasted for days. She'd never had pain like that before. When it got bad enough to make her throw up, she dragged herself to the doctor's, but they found nothing wrong with her and said she was most likely stressed out at work.

El rubbed her temples as she leaned back in her seat. She'd brought along the painkillers she'd been prescribed, but prevention was better than cure—massaging, she thought, might ward off the pain.

The train made a stop. The canvas tote El had slotted between her feet bumped against her calves as its contents—three large, hardcover ring binders—moved with the inertia. She felt very wise to have chosen to wear a pantsuit that day.

The files contained presentation materials the client had requested they get ready in hardcopy—he'd couriered 60 floppy disks to their

office, poor Junko had stood at her computer all day printing and Oliver the Intern had to run out to buy more ink.

El was going to drop off the files at the hotel they'd booked for the client before heading to the airport to pick him up. She checked the time—it was a couple minutes past three, and his flight was scheduled to arrive at five. There was time. She grabbed the heavy tote as the train rolled into Shinbashi Station. This was her stop.

El made for the escalators, grunting a little as she hauled her cargo. She wasn't completely unfit, but the folders seemed a lot heavier than what she was used to lifting at the gym. Her trainer would've been proud to see her right now.

She stopped in her tracks as she saw the orange sign at the mouth of the escalator: *UNDER MAINTENANCE. Sorry for the inconvenience, please use the stairs.*

She looked at the long flight of stairs beside the escalator that led up to the exit, before turning her head to try and spot the elevators she knew were situated at the far end of the platform.

She couldn't even see them.

"Dumb luck," she muttered, shaking her head as she resigned herself to the climb. She wasn't the only one struggling with the inconvenience—her fellow sufferers included mothers with prams, people with suitcases, an elderly lady with a walking stick.

Days like these, she wished she had superpowers. She'd levitate them all.

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**From:** Elodie Thayer <elodie@gowise.co.jp >  
**Sent:** Friday, February 27, 1998 11:01 AM +0900  
**To:** Mike Wheeler <michaelwheeler@aol.com >  
**Cc:** Simon Foster <simon@gowise.co.jp >  
**Subject:** Re: New coordinator

Dear Mr Wheeler,

My name is Elodie Thayer, and I will be taking over from Simon.

Regarding the documents you've sent over—would you like the presentation translated, or would an interpretation during the pitch suffice?

Best regards,

Elodie Thayer, Consultant

GoWise Event Solutions

+81 45-2323-8247 (ext: 8255)

elodie@gowise.co.jp

Yokohama Landmark Tower, 2-2-1 Minatomirai, Nishi Ward,  
Yokohama, Kanagawa

**From:** Mike Wheeler <michaelwheeler@aol.com >

**Sent:** Thursday, February 26, 1998 09:30 PM -0500

**To:** Elodie Thayer <elodie@gowise.co.jp >

**Cc:** Simon Foster <simon@gowise.co.jp >

**Subject:** Re: New coordinator

Given the sheer amount of slides (once again—I apologise), I don't think a translation is necessary. Just an interpretation is fine, although I hope we could rehearse together a couple of times before the pitch.

Perhaps you could just familiarise yourself with the games and the characters we've put in the portfolio? Also, I'll have to show Red Entertainment that our products align with theirs, so it'd be great if you could go over their RPGs and see what they've launched so far.

Thank you!

Mike Wheeler

CEO, One Campaign More

**From:** Elodie Thayer <elodie@gowise.co.jp >

**Sent:** Friday, February 27, 1998 11:49 AM +0900

**To:** Mike Wheeler <michaelwheeler@aol.com >

**Cc:** Simon Foster < simon@gowise.co.jp >

**Subject:** Re: New coordinator

Dear Mr Wheeler,

Thank you for your prompt reply.

I'm looking forward to meeting you on Monday. Have a safe flight.

Best regards,

Elodie Thayer, Consultant

GoWise Event Solutions

+ 81 45-2323-8247 (ext: 8255)

elodie@gowise.co.jp

Yokohama Landmark Tower, 2-2-1 Minatomirai, Nishi Ward,  
Yokohama, Kanagawa

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Oliver the Intern had made the sign—*MICHAEL WHEELER*, it'd said, in bold, 150-point Helvetica. He'd put it in a clear case and placed it in the tote bag with the files, so before leaving the office El had made a mental note to take it out after her stop at the hotel—except now she was already at the airport, and she didn't have the sign.

El closed her eyes and took a deep breath, feeling her temple throb in warning.

No. She wasn't going to let this trigger a headache. This wasn't the most unfortunate thing that had happened to her on the job, not at all. She was good at solving problems, getting out of bad situations. She had this.

El tightened her grip on the strap of her purse and looked around the arrival hall. There were counters offering bus services to the city, cellular phones for rental, and luggage delivery right to the customers' doorsteps.

This was Japan, El reassured herself. They were very good at the art of convenience, and people tended to be civilised and helpful, especially if you spoke the language. Which, thankfully, El did. She

had to, in fact, since it was her job to translate for her clients so *their* clients could understand them.

Her eyes fell on the sign that pointed to the information counter, and she immediately felt relieved. Surely they could lend her a marker and spare the blank side of an airport map?

Minutes later she was in the arrival hall, holding up a sheet of printer paper that bore Michael Wheeler's name. The marker had had a chiseled tip, and she'd made sure to keep turning it so all the lines in the alphabets turned out nice and fat.

El had done a bit of homework on Michael Wheeler—she'd run searches in AltaVista and Yahoo, and though there hadn't been any pictures of him, she'd found a newspaper article.

He was really young for a CEO. He'd graduated from college in '93, which made him somewhere around her age. In his freshman year he designed his first computer game, and by the time he was a senior, several of his MIT schoolmates were helping to develop that game—they would go on to form the core staff of One Campaign More, Wheeler's game development studio; and the game, *Island of the Mist*, would go on to become their greatest hit.

El tried to recall what she'd been doing in 1993. She'd been a senior, which meant it'd been a year of job hunting and writing that research paper on Japanese onomatopoeia. Fun times, but definitely not anything that would've made her a millionaire.

The pattering of footsteps made El look up, and the first stream of disembarked passengers entered the waiting area. Several of them looked like fresh death after the long haul flight, but the faces of a few lit up as they spotted their loved ones waving to them.

El felt the paper get a little soggy in her hand as her palms started to sweat. One of these people was going to be Michael Wheeler. He'd requested for a full-time interpreter, which meant she'd be spending three long days with him, four if she counted that evening. She hoped hard that he'd be as easygoing as he sounded in his emails.

El had never been a huge people person—ironic, seeing that being

friendly was actually part of her job description—and it always required a lot of acting on her part when she had to break the ice with anyone, what with the smiling and the handshakes and small talk.

It wasn't that El was fake. Not really. She didn't think of it that way, at least.

It'd all started with waking up in that hospital bed and having to be told who she was. She couldn't remember anything that had happened before her surgery—she'd even forgotten her own name, her mother's face and all the struggles with her illness. Her tumour-free life had been crafted by the accounts of people around her, and she'd had to build her identity from scratch, the entire process making her wonder if she was really being who she had the potential to be; or if the amnesia had damaged her permanently, somehow, and she was forging a more inferior personality with her homeschooled, socially awkward, teenaged existence who had to relearn social cues and most functional parts of the English lexicon.

In college, El saw that people who were more confident and outgoing seemed to have life easier. They were the ones who got their questions answered, the ones who got first pick of the most capable minds for group projects. And most of them seemed like decent people, people who were kind and amiable, or were at least pretending to be.

That had been the turning point. El figured that even if she couldn't be them, she could at least mimic them.

See, the thing was, she'd always been a survivor.

Thus began her benign charade as a jocular, gregarious individual. Fast forward to adulthood, and El's performance reviews at GoWise were great. Clients praised her. Her bosses loved her. She'd been 1996's Newcomer of the Year. No one had to know she played a stranger to herself; no one had to know that on the inside, she was still that shy, introspective, anxious girl with a void in her heart she could never explain.

Perhaps it was there because she was destined to mourn her

hypothetical lost identity. Or maybe it was because pretending to be someone she wasn't took a soul-sucking amount of effort.

As these thoughts settled uncomfortably in her mind, El noticed a stationary figure, a man in a Chesterfield coat of gunmetal grey, his immobility stark against the motion of the crowd. He was standing about two feet away, staring at her with his pale lips parted, knuckles white as he gripped the handle of his suitcase.

El raised the sign a few inches and offered him her smallest smile, raising her eyebrows at him imploringly.

He bridged their distance with a few tentative steps. El was about to greet him when his brows knitted, and his eyes seemed wounded as he whispered:

"El?"

El closed her mouth, unsure of how to respond. While it was irrefutable that no one really called her 'Elodie', people rarely called her 'El' right from the get-go. She *granted* them the permission to call her 'El'.

That said, Michael Wheeler was paying her firm a lot of money, and her firm in turn paid her a lot of money, so she was kind of at his mercy.

Still, boundaries were boundaries.

"Mr Wheeler, we don't know each other very well yet, so I'd prefer a more formal address. No hard feelings; I just like to keep things professional," said El, throwing in a laugh to ease the tension.

Michael Wheeler (El hoped to God this was really Michael Wheeler and not some random nut job who somehow knew her name) looked utterly confused.

"You're not eleven?" he asked, flustered.

El frowned. "Were you expecting a *child* to come pick you up?"

"That's not what I meant," said Michael Wheeler, sounding



exasperated, then his gaze fell to El's left hand.

"Do you, by any chance, have a tattoo on your forearm?" He pointed to the limb in question, frustration and eagerness apparent in his voice.

This guy was *creeping her out*.

"No, I don't have a tattoo on my forearm." El sighed. "I hope this doesn't offend, Mr Wheeler, but you're making me quite uncomfortable."

There was a beat as Michael Wheeler fixed his eyes on her face, and she swore he was studying it feature by feature. She looked away, embarrassed.

"I guess... there have been stranger things," he finally said, breaking the silence.

El gave him a wry smile. "You think?"

Michael Wheeler seemed to be pulling himself together as he said: "Sorry. You just - you just look a lot like someone I know. Someone I've missed."

El took this to mean Michael Wheeler had an ex who had a tattoo on her left forearm, and it made El a bit guilty to have thought of him as *creepy*, because maybe his girlfriend died and he missed her terribly? Maybe he was reacting so strangely because El really did look very much like her? It didn't explain the 'eleven' bit, but grief was grief.

"No offence taken, Mr Wheeler," said El in her kindest voice.

"Please, call me Mike," said Michael Wheeler, and he seemed shy all of a sudden.

This made El hesitate. If she didn't water down the formality, he'd end up calling her 'Miss Thayer', and that was just going to be odd because *he* was the client, not her.

"Right. Okay." El stuck out her hand. "Then I guess you can call me El."

## 2. Fern - Exacting: an art

### Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you for your wonderful response on the last chapter. This chapter is a blast to the past, and also introduces my main original character, along with Barb's family.

### Fern - 1983

“Fern,” said Ernie Holland as he answered the door, his relief unmistakable in his wretchedness, “thank God. Janice is in shambles—I keep telling her Barbara’s gonna be okay, but she imagines the worst.”

“Hey, Ernie.” Fern squeezed Ernie's arm as stepped aside to let her enter the house. “You holding up?”

“Yeah. Someone’s still gotta take care of the kids, y’know?”

Fern nodded. The Hollands were rather well-to-do, and they had a pretty large brood; the youngest were a pair of six-year-old twin boys, and on her visits Fern usually saw them tearing through the house in raucous enthusiasm, being chased by nine-year-old Nadine, who very willingly took over the *Big Sister's Boss!* role from Barb the moment the twins were born. Then there was Aaron, who was in sixth grade and spent all his free time playing baseball.

“Jacob and Paul sure are quiet tonight,” commented Fern as she took off her trench coat, folded it, and slung it over her arm.

“Yeah, well.” Ernie shrugged, beckoning for Fern to follow him upstairs. “I gave Aaron five bucks to play with them in the basement. He’s doing a pretty good job.”

They reached the landing, and Fern heard sobbing from what had to be Barb’s room, and a child’s voice asking:

“Do you want some tea, Mommy?”

Ernie cocked his head towards the open door, clapped a heavy hand on Fern's shoulder in thanks, and left.

Fern peeped into the room and braved a knock.

"Janice?"

"Oh," said Janice as she rose from the bed, eyes wet, crossing the room to hug her friend, "Fern, oh Fern, they said she ran away, how could *Barb* have run away?"

Fern rubbed Janice's back to soothe her, before sitting Janice back on the bed and turning to Nadine.

"Nadine, if it's not too much to ask, could you get me and Mommy some tea? I don't want you to be carrying it up here yourself though, so when it's brewed would you holler for me?"

"Sure, Miss Fern."

"Thanks, honey."

With Nadine out of the room, Fern knew Janice was ready to spill. She held Janice's hands and met her eyes.

"Janice, I'm here for you. Tell me everything."

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Fern lived on the north side of Habersham, just before it intersected with Broadway. She'd moved to Hawkins in 1972, quietly set up shop, and within a year she had 14 employees in her small but steadily growing landscaping business.

The house she currently lived in had belonged to a widower who died shortly after his wife's death; she'd bought it, remodelled it, and paid the architect, electricians and contractors 40 per cent more of what they were due to never speak of the *adjustments* she'd made to the basement. Any subsequent maintenance she requested would also entitle her vendors to a 10 per cent mark-up on the fee—they knew they had a good deal, and for the past 11 years their lips had indeed

remained sealed.

After all, secret laboratories had to remain secret—especially from each other. Fern couldn't risk Brenner finding out about her work.

She sat down at one of the lab tables in her basement, grabbing a pen and opening her log book. She scrutinised the contents page for the month. Entry #1 had been Theodore von Braun's disappearance, followed by Will Byers's, then poor Benny's suicide, and now Barb.

Strange things took place every day, but recently there'd been one too many for a place like Hawkins. Why, Fern could only guess, though she was sure it all flew under the police's radar. It wasn't the kind of thing the cops paid attention to; it was the kind of talk you hear housewives exchanging in their front yards, the kind of gossip your workmen overhear in peoples' gardens and repeat to each other on boring lunch breaks, the kind that rich old ladies blabbered on about when you arrived to vivify their homes with decorative rock.

It was the kind of news Fern was privy to, and she'd been relying on these sources to fortify her belief in her plan, which was now very, very close to completion.

At first glance, no one would have guessed Fern was who she was. Fern presented as a stout, tan woman with a shock of raven hair; a permanent smile on her round, friendly face; the ally and confidante of every madam. She was known as the single lady who had grown tired of the big city, seeking refuge in the humdrum lull of Hawkins, reincarnated as a wealthy spinster who helped people make their gardens look more interesting.

No one knew she'd been a researcher on Project MKUltra.

No one knew she'd once been tiny and slim and young and naive, believing her contributions to be for the country, believing Martin Brenner to be the answer to ridding the Communists.

No one knew that when she left Brenner's side, she'd taken his research with her—every abominable shred of data—and was now just one step away to developing the serum that would end it all.

She was Fern Thayer, and she was bent on redemption.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I'm a little bit older than most of you on here, I'm guessing, so I hope you don't mind these characters who are actually as old as I am. I also thought it'd be safer to set the story in a country that I'm familiar with, hence Japan. I think at some point El is going back to the US to visit family, so I'm going to have to do a bit of research for that seeing that I've never been--I do seek your forgiveness in advance if there are any discrepancies with the setting.

### 3. Mike - Messing with the doppelgänger

#### Mike

The pixie cut only lent to the likeness, and her eyes seemed to be the same roundness, the same brownness—didn't eyes never change throughout a person's life?—and that *face*; he'd always thought she looked very grown-up for her age, it wasn't hard to imagine Eleven's twelve-year-old pretty as Eleven's twenty-seven-year-old pretty, how the hell was this not her and why the fuck was her name also El?

He chanced one more look out of the corner of his eye. She had her chin propped up in her palm and was gazing out of the darkened window (Mike had indicated on his preferences survey he wanted to ride the Narita Express into Tokyo; he liked to ride foreign trains very much) and that look of brooding, that very look—it was just uncanny.

"Is the resemblance really that strong?" said El into her fingers, her eyes not leaving the glass.

Ah, damn. They were in a tunnel. He'd practically been staring at her through a mirror.

"You could be twins," he blurted, deciding on the truth.

El swivelled her head very slowly to meet his eyes.

"Mike, you're twenty-seven, right?"

Mike nodded.

"So am I." There was a slight twitch in her lips as they curved upward for one brief moment—then the smile left, as quickly as it'd appeared.

Mike's heart fluttered. *So alike.*

"Could you just, for one short minute," El fiddled with the hem of her jacket, "allow me to say something borderline inappropriate without suffering any consequences that will jeopardise the good favour I'm

in with my boss?”

Suddenly Mike’s heartbeat sounded a lot closer.

“Sure,” he said, hoping his voice wasn’t too shaky.

El took a deep breath.

“When you look at me like that, I actually feel this compulsion to hurt you, so I really think you should stop.”

El exhaled with a whoosh of air, and she said with a grin: “Wow, that would’ve been a lot more difficult if you’d been older and more imposing. No hard feelings?”

Mike could only stare. The Eleven he knew hadn’t had a very extensive vocabulary, though she’d been very, very frank, and Mike was very confused right now, because this El was very much like *his* El, and she also seemed like she could be a potential version of his El, and was he even making any sense with these thoughts?

“Mike?” El prompted.

“Hm?”

“Stop staring.”

“Oh, right,” said Mike, hurriedly twisting away from El to turn his gaze on a spot of upholstery on the seat in front of him.

It was insane. Why did he even care so much? He’d been 12, for crying out loud. He’d kissed her once. That was it.

But in his heart Mike knew why.

She’d been his.

Mike didn’t like admitting it because it made him feel like some sort of creep, but preserving all the memories he’d had of Eleven had been an unconfessed obsession for years. After all he’d done for her and she for him, after all they’d gone through, after that kiss—he didn’t want to forget.

It wasn't like he was trying to find her. He just wanted to think of her. Fifteen years he'd fantasised—sometimes at the back of his mind, though more often through pockets of time that were reserved just to recall her face, to imagine how she would look like as they aged. Some of his thoughts became less innocent as he got older (it wasn't beneath him to admit that), but most of it had been chaste and warm and wonderful, until it all came crashing down with the memory of her saying goodbye, and how he'd cried as he shouted her name in that wreck of a classroom, desperation in his lungs.

*She's gone now*, he'd told Will when Will had woken up. That'd been the first time he said it out loud, and he'd repeated it hundreds of times over but never once did it make him believe.

Once, in college, when they'd gotten drunk while hanging out at Dustin's, Lucas had brought it up.

"She loved you, man," Lucas had said, and he might've even been crying a little, "she said goodbye to you. Just you."

It made Mike wonder if Lucas had loved her too, but the thought was too painful to entertain, and he'd pushed it away.

El cleared her throat.

"Mike, seriously. I *will* hit you."

Mike blinked as he snapped out of his thoughts. He hadn't even known he'd been staring again, but indeed, he was. What was he to do, though? She had that magnetic, magnetic face.

Mike was about to defend himself when he saw it—she'd left her elbow angled on the windowsill, and on the inside of her forearm, revealed by the three-quarter length sleeve of her knit sweater, was a scar.

Thoughtlessly, Mike grabbed her wrist and held it up close to his face to examine the mark.

"Oh my god!" yelled El, trying to squirm out of his grasp. Several other passengers turned their heads, but Mike didn't care.



“How did you get this?” He pressed his thumb against the scar, eyes wide. If her tattoo had been removed...

“Look—I’m very sorry, but I think I’ll have to arrange for the office to pair you up with another interpreter—”

“El, please, don’t freak out,” begged Mike, searching El’s expression frantically for a lifeline, “I’m not hitting on you or anything, I promise. Please just tell me.”

El glared at him and snatched her wrist out of his hand.

“I had an accident when I was a kid,” she growled, brows still in a fierce line.

“What kind of accident?” Mike pressed on.

El’s eyes flickered with emotion that Mike couldn’t read.

“I got cut on a can or something,” she mumbled, dropping her gaze. “I think. I don’t know, I can’t remember.”

An announcement came over the sound system, interrupting Mike’s concentration and his ridiculous interrogation. He realised, in horror, how crazy he had to seem to El and to everyone who was looking.

“I’m very, very sorry,” said Mike, deflating. “It’s just - you know what, maybe you’re right. Maybe you should arrange for another interpreter. I’m really sorry. You’ve been nothing but decent to me but I’ve been terrorising you the entire evening. I’m not usually like this. I’m very sorry, El—I mean, Miss Thayer.”

Mike rubbed his fingers over his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose, scrunching his face up in embarrassment.

He was unhealthily obsessed, that was what. This was his big warning sign. It’d been bound to come sooner than later, this straw that broke the camel’s back—the one to end all his dreams of the girl he first loved.

He had to let Eleven go. This woman here wasn’t her. It was just a series of convenient coincidences—perhaps Mike was just seeing

what he wanted to see, trying to fit this El into the memory of his.

They didn't say much else for the rest of the trip. El, still visibly upset, took him wordlessly to his hotel, said a clipped 'good night' in the elevator lobby, and left.

Mike felt ashamed for his behaviour on the train, and was devastated to see her go—which was stupid because this wasn't Eleven, wasn't Eleven, wasn't Eleven—but he had no right to be dejected. He'd freaked her out. He was lucky she didn't report him for sexual harassment; superficially, that'd been what it was.

The doors to the elevator slid open, and Mike half-heartedly kicked his suitcase in before making an irritated noise when it didn't move far, and he begrudgingly pulled it in the rest of the way. He punched the button a little more viciously than he should have, and the doors bumped shut.

"She's gone now," he said loudly, voice echoing in the empty elevator.

Then he closed his eyes, and wished he was better at lying to himself.

## 4. El - To be a Thayer

### Notes for the Chapter:

It is common practice to wear face masks (surgical masks) in Japan to prevent people from getting sick or from spreading their sicknesses to others. This practice is mentioned in the last part of this chapter.

### El

In her heart El knew that Mike hadn't meant any harm, but she'd chosen to take offence because it just infuriated her that guys who were rich and successful seemed to think they could do whatever they pleased, what with being constantly governed by whim and paying little consideration to the victims of their fancies.

El stormed into her apartment and switched on the lights in the entryway. She made a beeline for her computer, turned on the modem, and stood in front of her kerosene heater in her stockinged feet as she waited for the internet connection to come to life. In her head she started writing the email she was going to fire off to Junko, who was in charge of their schedules, requesting that another interpreter be in charge of the Wheeler account.

When the room was warmed up and her fingers nimble enough to type, El navigated to her email client and was about to click 'Compose' before she saw she had one unread message in her personal inbox that had come in that morning.

**From:** Fern Thayer <fern\_thayer@hotmail.com >

**Sent:** Sunday, March 1, 1998 07:22 PM -0500

**To:** El Thayer <notmelodie@hotmail.com >

**Subject:** Mom Notes #161

Today I went up to your room and to my horror, I realised I'd clean forgot about that pile of stuff you'd asked if I could help sort out for Goodwill. Though to be really honest, you could've just done it

yourself. You were around two weeks and just had to pick your last day home to be charitable. Honestly, El.

(I guess procrastination runs in the family.)

So as I was sorting through the things and putting them into boxes, I saw that you were donating that set of social situation books—you know, the ones that helped us discuss morals and appropriate reactions?

Well, confession time.

I remember being very worried whenever we did that activity. I mean, think about it. I was in charge of shaping an amnesiac's moral compass! It was a lot of pressure. I was also constantly wondering if I was on high enough moral ground to be helming such a project.

As it turned out you'd retained your perceptions of what was right and what was wrong, which was largely comforting, but it also meant you had no middle ground.

Do you remember how your judgments were always kind of extreme? Something was either Good or Bad, mostly, and once you had an opinion of the situation you would stick to it so stubbornly. The way you dealt with things was always so black and white; there was no forgiving, no grey zone. 'Dead loyal', that's what the psychiatrist said about you.

Now I can laugh about it, but truth be told, there were tears. Not going to tell you how you hurt me (and don't you dare feel guilty about it because I'm no saint either, there've been things I've said to you that I'd like to take back tenfold), but the bottomline is—I was consumed with self-doubt every single day. I was responsible for you, and you had to start afresh, and you seemed so new to me... How could I let you out in the real world?

So I decided to homeschool you. Which was the right thing to do, you have to admit—you know how atrocious your spelling was.

(Oh, I know you now spell impeccably. Mommy's just being mean. Sorry, Elliebean! Hey, that rhymed.)

You know, every mom has a set of classic worries about their kid, and every day I open that drawer of worries, select one, and ponder. Today's the same. Having you thousands of miles away makes me more contemplative, definitely.

But I keep reassuring myself: I've always told you you were born to seek, and I don't regret putting that thought in you. It might not even have been me—you'd always been a precocious child (both pre-surgery and post), and you never settled for anything lesser than what you thought you deserved. It's in your nature. Perhaps it's that black-and-white judgment of yours working—the lines are always so clear to you, the paths you pick always apparent.

But El, don't be afraid to venture on foggy paths, because they don't all lead to bad things. Don't be afraid to cut a little slack, to give a little more. Don't discount humility or compassion—God knows we need more nice people in the world—and stay wise, stay kind.

Now go make yourself a beautiful day.

Love you always,  
Mom

\*\*\*

When El was 14, something clicked. Words were finally vehicles of meaning, and faces were no longer undecipherable puzzles of emotive design. She was soaking up the world, and it brought her into a state of knowing, an exhilarating awareness that she could *be*, that she was done chasing, and fumbling, and grappling.

Book after book she devoured, and she started to listen to the radio. She didn't like television very much, but she enjoyed going to the movies with her mother, Fern. When they weren't working on her lessons, they went out—often to museums and fairs and sometimes even on road trips, and when the weather was good there'd be a picnic in their front yard, and Fern would read to her from her own favourite books. Sometimes it was fiction, sometimes it wasn't, but El liked it all.

It was liberating, this journey of enlightenment; but El also found herself newly vulnerable to a frightening amount of possibilities—both good and bad—and she knew it couldn't be helped, not when everything was now a product of knowledge.

Her first real challenge came when her mother sat her down and told her she was adopted.

El hadn't expected to feel how she had felt; she could name confusion, hurt, and resentment in the feelings that assuaged her, the latter few directed to her birth parents. They hadn't wanted her, she immediately assumed, hadn't considered her worthy of their love.

Fern had said that El's mother died young, and nothing was known about her father. Fern had been a foster parent who eventually decided to adopt, and that was how she became El's mom. El had been in another foster home before Fern's, and Fern never talked much about it, but the impression she'd given El was that it had been a bad place.

According to Fern and their family friend Uncle Dom, El had gotten sick shortly after she became Fern's daughter—her doctors found out she had a tumour in her brain, so they removed it even though they knew there was a risk of severe memory loss and alterations to her personality; her emotional intelligence could get compromised; and these were just some of the possible impairments.

It was either that or dying, so El never begrudged Fern for making the decision. After all, Fern had chosen her. Of all the children Fern could've picked, she'd picked El. Fern had given her what her biological parents refused her. Fern had perhaps given her more than what they could have, and El wasn't even sure she deserved it all.

El loved Fern. She loved Fern the moment she met her, when her eyelids fluttered open to harsh, fluorescent lights and *Fern*—worried-looking and holding her hand—and El hadn't been able to speak, but Fern had gathered her into her arms and told her she loved her so much, voice cracking; and that she was her Mommy, and that El had been a very brave girl. El had felt so safe, so saved.

El loved Fern even more when Fern never gave up on her despite her

tantrums and her tears, when she'd been anything but lovable, when she'd smashed lamps and thrown books and broken all her pencils.

Fern had chosen her, even when she hadn't had to. El wanted to live up to that.

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The smells were awful, and the day hadn't even started.

El grimaced as she shifted her briefcase to shield her chest, much to the chagrin of the guy with bad breath, the guy with bad breath, and the guy with bad breath that she could smell through his face mask. She muttered a *sumimasen* as she effectively jabbed them in the ribs, though she hardly felt sorry as they pushed right back.

El wasn't considered a very tall person back home, but at five-four plus heels she was the height of several men in the carriage of that incredibly crowded train. She'd chosen to wear a skirt today, and thus hoped to God none of these people were perverts who had mirrors installed on the tips of their shoes.

She wished it wasn't a thing, but it was a thing.

Pressed into her back was a woman; she could tell from the boobs, and the cloud of Cuir de Russie that was attacking her nostrils and threatening to make her sneeze. El liked her Chanel, but not at this quantity.

There was also a gaggle of whinging teenagers who were right behind Team Halitosis—high schoolers, judging by their uniforms—and they were leaning unceremoniously against the men, bringing their odour dangerously close to El.

Shinbashi Station finally came up, and El was swept out of the car onto the platform along with the crowd, able to breathe normally again.

She felt her heart beat a little faster as she made for the exit closest to Mike Wheeler's hotel. Nerves. Dread. She'd overreacted the previous evening, taking advantage of the closeness of Mike's age to, quite

rudely, show her displeasure outrightly; the bottomline was, Mike was still the client, and his actions had been neither intentional nor malicious.

*Don't discount humility. Don't discount compassion. Stay wise. Stay kind.*

El had already forgiven Mike the moment she finished reading her mother's email, but communicating her forgiveness was another thing.

*Cut a little slack. Give a little more.*

El got to the fare gates and inserted her pass card into the turnstile before retrieving it on the other side. Her hands grew clammy as she started rehearsing an apology to Mike Wheeler in her head. She knew she had to reach out first—she was representing the company he'd hired, after all—and soldier through the day with him whether or not he chose to make it awkward.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thank you for keeping up with this fic, and for sending your kudos and comments. Much appreciated!



## 5. Fern - The strangers

### Notes for the Chapter:

There are two '80s references in this.

1. The 'German song about politics and balloons' is Nena's *99 Luftballons*, which was actually pretty much dominating the American charts in January 1984.

2. 'Mr. Wizard' refers to Don Herbert, the host of *Mr. Wizard's World*, a science show for kids that was big on Nickelodeon in the '80s.

### Fern - 1984

They were on the Interstate 70, somewhere in Ohio. Eleven had been quiet for the past two hours, and Fern had kept the radio on since they left Hawkins just to fill the silence.

She'd tried to make small talk with the child; first she talked about the radio broadcast, telling Eleven how WHWK-FM was her favourite station, and how, now that they were moving to Pittsburgh, she'd miss DJ Franco's *Good AM, Hawkins!*—she'd been tuning in for the past 10 years. Eleven had just nodded, leant back in her seat, set her eyes on the radio dials and mirthlessly listened to Franco's jovial banter with a caller.

Fern hadn't thought a 12-year-old could make her this nervous, but Eleven did.

Fern had then asked if Eleven was feeling cold (she could turn up the heat), if she was feeling warm (she could turn down the heat!), if she wanted something to drink (there was a thermos with hot chocolate in the back seat?). Eleven had just shaken her head to the first few questions, and at some point, levitated the flask of hot chocolate into her lap and helped herself to it.

Now Fern had run out of things to say, and she suddenly had a dark thought—what if Eleven didn't like her?

It wasn't a groundless assumption—the last time Eleven had had a parent, it hadn't exactly been a joy ride. What if Eleven now classified all the adults who hadn't been acquaintances of kids she knew as untrustworthy, if not wicked? What *did* Eleven think of Fern? Had Fern successfully explained the concept of adoption? Had Eleven actually understood everything Fern, Chief Hopper and Joyce Byers had explained to her that night they'd first met? Most importantly, did Eleven understand that although she was indeed going to have tests run on her brain in a government-funded lab with mostly secret operations, it wasn't going to be like what she'd had to go through under the hands of Brenner?

The thought of herself being likened to Brenner made Fern want to throw up.

*"...and now we'll take a break for the news! You're listening to WHWK-FM, home of the beats. Louise, over to you!"* said the radio, and Fern frowned as the jingle played, trying to put a finger on why she was finding the broadcast so peculiar in its familiarity.

She looked up at the signs overhead. They told her that Columbus was four miles away. There was no way she should be able to listen to Hawkins radio.

Wait. Had they been on this station all this time?

"Oh, my god," murmured Fern, arriving at the answer; and true enough, when she looked at Eleven, she saw that a spot of blood had appeared on the girl's upper lip.

"Eleven, if you're somehow translating the radio signal from Hawkins, I would like you to stop," said Fern, leaving a hand on the wheel as the other scrabbled for the handkerchief in her pocket. "Wipe your nose, please."

Eleven took the handkerchief, but Louise was still informing Hawkins residents of road repairs on Briarcliff and how traffic was going to be rerouted throughout the week. Cleaning up her bleeding nose, Eleven asked:

"Why, Fern?"

Fern could detect Eleven's unease. It was slight, but it was there. Could it be that Eleven was thinking Fern was *blaming* her for something?

"Because every time you use your powers, millions of your cells die at an accelerated speed, and your body is put in overdrive as it tries to regenerate at that same speed—which, in itself, isn't natural, because humans aren't built to—" Fern caught herself as she saw how the crease in Eleven's forehead was deepening along with the struggle to comprehend.

"Okay, sorry. Easy version—it's not good for your body, so I would like you to stop."

There was a crackle in the speakers, and Louise's perfect newscaster accent was replaced by that German song that had taken over the airwaves recently, the one about politics and balloons. Fern relaxed, and she heaved a sigh as she realised Eleven had done what she did because WHWK was Fern's favourite channel that she was *leaving behind*. Eleven hadn't been experimenting; she'd been *empathetic*.

Several things coursed through Fern's mind at once: was this Eleven's way of trying to come to terms with the loss that the upcoming procedure would cause? They *had* told her she was going to forget. Was Fern a terrible guardian-to-be for planning to take away the only good memories Eleven had of her life in Hawkins? And really, how sweet was this girl?

"Thank you," said Fern, glancing at Eleven and smiling. "I know you were trying to help me listen to the channel out here."

Eleven gave a pronounced nod, and a movement of her lips that wasn't really a smile. Then she asked:

"What is 'cells'?"

Fern blinked. After two hours of not exchanging a word, *this* was the conversation they were going to have?

Fern sincerely hoped Eleven liked science.

They stopped at a cafe for a mid-morning snack, putting on hold Fern's lecture on tissue histology and healing (Fern seemed to be doing a good job at answering Eleven's questions, and by the time they'd gotten to the topic of scars she thought she could give Mr. Wizard a pretty good run for his money).

To Fern's surprise, Eleven made a request for waffles.

Fine, Eleven's actual words were "Do they have Eggos?", but Fern was really quite pleased; Eleven was feeling comfortable enough with her to be asking her for something. This marked progress.

Except there weren't any waffles on the menu.

"Sorry, sweetie," said Fern apologetically, "how about French toast?"

"French toast?"

Fern didn't really know what to feel when she realised Eleven had never had French toast.

"You'll like it," said Fern. "It's not too far from waffles."

When the French toast arrived, gloriously thick and gilded in syrup, Eleven looked at it curiously before turning to Fern for affirmation.

"Go on," said Fern, nodding, and Eleven reached for the toast, completely ignoring the knife and fork the waitress had set down beside her plate. "Honey, maybe not with your hands..."

Fern trailed off as it struck her; Eleven had ignored the knife and fork not because she hadn't wished to use them—it just hadn't occurred to her that they were to be used.

Eleven's fingers were now curling away from the toast, and her brows knitted as she stared at the plate.

In that moment Fern felt a fierce yearning to protect the child, spurred by heartbreaking imaginations of how she'd been raised. How had she eaten? Where had she slept? What other things had she

been deprived of?

Fern could feel the stinging in her nose; she bit down on the inside of her lip but it was too late—a tear had already fallen onto the tablecloth. Wordlessly, she took Eleven's knife and fork and started cutting up her toast.

She'd formed two small pieces when Eleven yanked the utensils out of Fern's hands and started cutting up the toast by herself.

Fern stared at Eleven—mostly in awe, though a small part of her was miffed at Eleven's coldness. There was a defiance in Eleven as she swiftly sliced the bread, and Fern realised it stemmed from a hunger to overcome all her vulnerabilities as quickly and as best as she could.

This child was very bright, realised Fern. She picked up new things at an alarming speed and was incredibly resourceful. She was also Fern's responsibility now, technically, and Fern once again found herself hoping the serum wouldn't rob Eleven of her qualities—yet, it wouldn't be awful to have Eleven be a little less taciturn, a little more expressive, more affectionate...

No, Fern thought, shaking her head. These ideas were dangerous. They were one step away from manipulating Eleven into being what Fern deemed ideal, and Fern rather preferred Eleven turn out to be who *she* wanted to be. She didn't want Eleven to suffer a different version of Brenner's hell, unintended or not.

Rage seared through Fern as she thought about Brenner abusing Eleven. That absolute swine.

He had hurt this child—this beautiful, living memory of Anita—by taking away her childhood, not giving her a proper name, even branding her body with a number, dehumanising her. Fern had to turn away from Eleven as she fisted her hands atop her knees, knowing how she was looking now would scare her; or worse, have her misread Fern's expression for disdain over the toast-cutting.

But it was an anger that Fern couldn't conceal. She really, really hated Martin Brenner.

## **Fern - 1983**

Elegance Landscaping Services was the name of Fern's company, and they had won the bid to become the contractor of Hawkins National Laboratory in the summer of '75.

Every Tuesday, Fern and her staff would arrive at the facility at 7 AM. Whoever was driving the truck would sign in at the security booth, and they would be waved into the compound to begin their work. Fern would delegate tasks, then drive around the place to make sure everyone was performing their jobs.

From about 8:30 AM, the employees of Hawkins Lab would start coming in. Some of the friendlier ones would say hi, and the ones who hadn't had their morning coffee would just pass them by, blearily patting their pockets as they looked for their staff ID. Fern would be back at the main building by then, supervising her team's final touches to the trees and lawns and flowerbeds.

Sometimes Dom, the facilities manager and Fern's main liaison with Hawkins Lab, would walk up to her for an innocuous chat, or supply her with some paperwork she needed to sign. Every one of Fern's workmen (and a couple of women) thought Fern and Dom had a thing, though they'd never said anything to refute or admit that. Fern would sometimes leave the place with Dom's gifts—jars of jam, ribboned boxes, tins of tea. It was quite sweet, people thought, that two people in their forties had seemed to find love.

On occasion, they'd been spotted together outside of the lab, in the vicinity of Fern's house, and people who knew them just exchanged knowing smiles, assuming that Dom's efforts were getting somewhere.

It was 9 AM that first Tuesday of November, and although Fern and team usually cleared out before the bosses arrived, they couldn't that day because there was just so much to do. Fall was almost over, and there was soil to test and lawns to reseed and mulch to turn—they couldn't risk the greenery at Hawkins Lab emerging from the snow

looking like winter had crapped all over it. Landscapers got fired for that.

“Fern,” called a voice, and Fern turned to see Dom approaching her with a paper bag in one hand and a clipboard in the other. She stood by her parked truck, giving him a big smile.

“Morning, Dom.”

“Hey,” Dom greeted, his eyes crinkling as he returned Fern’s smile. “Brought you something.”

“Thank you,” said Fern, extremely thankful, and she reached up to squeeze his arm. “I really appreciate it.”

“And now for work.” Dom showed her the clipboard, on it a schedule Fern had printed for him the previous week. “I expect you’ll be tackling the irrigation lines next Tuesday?”

“Yes. We’re also gonna remove the hoses and sprinklers, don’t want them to freeze to death when winter comes.”

“We’ll give you some space in the storage room. And you’ll be coming to plough the driveways when it starts to snow?”

“Oh, definitely,” said Fern, and out of the corner of her eye she saw Brenner and his entourage approaching the main building.

Brenner’s appearance hadn’t changed much since she first met him all those years ago: his commanding stature, his penchant for grey suits and dark ties, his calculating gaze. The only significant difference was the colour of his hair—it was now completely white. He’d aged.

Even Martin Brenner was human, Fern thought to herself.

He had an aide, a fawning young man who probably worshipped Brenner the way Fern used to. The aide was sounding very important as he briefed Brenner on the day’s events, and as Brenner passed, Fern automatically looked down, pretending to be very interested in Dom’s clipboard.

“—and the tank will be ready by 11 AM,” concluded Brenner’s

assistant. Brenner nodded, then stopped right in front of Fern's truck. He was eyeing something in the back, and she quickly exchanged a look with Dom, who gave a tiny shake of his head, indicating he had no clue what was going on.

"Today is a very special day," said Brenner to his aide, pointing at something amongst Fern's cargo, "and there should be no impediments. We should keep her in a good mood."

The aide called out to Alfonso, one of Fern's workmen who was checking soil pH levels right by the truck. Alfonso dusted his hands on his overalls and asked:

"How may I help you?"

"We'd like to buy that plant, please."

Alfonso frowned. "We don't sell. This is for a house we're going to later."

"It's just a tiny potted plant," the aide put on an irritated look and gestured to the back of the truck, "and you have a dozen. Surely you can spare us one?"

Fern left Dom to rescue Alfonso.

"Hello," she introduced herself, trying to keep her voice from shaking because she would be jeopardising everything that she'd worked for if Brenner recognised her, "I'm the person in-charge. Is anything the matter?"

"We want one of those."

Fern followed Fawning Assistant's pointing finger. He was asking for one of Phil Larson's pre-ordered pansies, sitting prettily in the morning sun, attractive in their rich purple. They'd caught Brenner's fancy. Fern wondered why.

"Boss," whispered Alfonso, stepping closer to Fern, "you know Mr Larson. He don't like people to mess up his garden. He don't like people to mess up anything! He says he wants fourteen pots, he gets the fourteen pots. You know every time some kids steal his gnomes,



he rings the police? We gonna give him a heart attack if he don't get his fourteen pots.”

“I know. And we’ll be late for him if we went back to replace—”

They were silenced when a shadow was cast upon them, and they looked up to see Brenner’s imposing form. He folded up a ten dollar bill and tucked it under one of the straps of Alfonso’s overalls. The aide took this as his cue to stride forward and swipe one of the pots, before stepping back in with the entourage.

“Keep the change,” said Brenner, patting Alfonso on shoulder, his smile not reaching his eyes.

Then he turned and walked away.

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## **Fern - 1984**

“Fern?”

Fern quickly wiped her eyes and turned to Eleven, who was almost done with her French toast.

“Yeah?” Fern tried to smile.

“You didn’t start,” said Eleven, pointing at Fern’s untouched quiche. Their eyes met, and Eleven looked disturbed as she took in Fern’s expression.

Eleven put down her fork and retrieved Fern’s slightly bloodied handkerchief from a pocket in her dress.

“Wipe your nose, please.”

Fern had to laugh, even though Eleven didn’t look amused.

Declining the handkerchief, Fern grabbed a couple of napkins from the table, dabbed at her eyes, and blew her nose. When she was done, she picked up her fork, considering her quiche, then put the

fork down again.

“Eleven.” Fern placed the back of her hand against the table and opened up her palm.

Eleven just stared at Fern’s hand before glancing up at Fern.

Fern patted her palm. “Put your hand here.”

Eleven seemed suspicious for one fleeting moment, and then the look faded from her eyes, leaving just the frown. She gingerly placed her hand in Fern’s, studying Fern’s face the whole time.

Fern folded her fingers against Eleven’s, then placed her free hand on top of Eleven’s to clasp it in both her own.

“You’re safe now.” Fern gave the child a small, lopsided smile.

Eleven returned it.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I'm having a bit of spare time, so I managed to churn this chapter out! Hope you're liking the story so far, and that you don't mind all the original characters. They're very central to the plot, so I hope you like them. They're all very nice people.

## 6. Mike - The other Upside Down

### Notes for the Chapter:

There are two '90s references in this chapter.

1. 'PalmPilot' — a personal digital assistant, which was basically the precursor to the smartphone. Think smartphone without the phone capabilities.

2. The game that Mike is interested to import to the US is an actual Japanese video game, *Sakura Wars*, that debuted in 1996. It was very successful in Japan, and Leni is an actual character in the game. I didn't make her backstory up. It's the same one from the game.

### Mike

Mike stopped in surprise as he saw El waiting for him in the elevator lobby, wearing a pinched look. She gave him a tentative wave, and he quickly walked over.

The receptionist at the front desk had said on the phone that his interpreter had arrived—he hadn't expected it to be El. He reckoned she was here because she had no choice; perhaps her company couldn't offer her a replacement at such late notice.

"Miss Thayer," greeted Mike, feeling his gut twist. There was so much of the previous evening he wanted to forget.

"El," she was quick to correct, and Mike saw a glimmer of hope.

"I'm sorry for yesterday," blurted Mike. "I was out of line."

"I'm sorry too," said El, forehead creasing, "I overreacted."

They stood there for a moment, steeping in their embarrassment.

"Um, so—how's the jet-lag?" hazarded El, mustering a smile. "Our clients from the U.S. are usually quite spacey at this hour the day after their flight."

Mike was very grateful El had been the one to initiate conversation, and he finally let himself smile.

“I’m pretty used to dealing with jet-lag since I travel so much. I didn’t sleep on the plane and went straight to bed last night—my body clock’s pretty much on Tokyo time.”

“Cool,” said El approvingly. She started opening her briefcase and glanced up at Mike. “Do you have your itinerary?”

“I have it on here.” Mike reached into his pockets and pulled out his PalmPilot. He tapped the screen with his stylus and navigated to the document.

“Oh, right! We’re supposed to have a breakfast meeting,” said Mike, remembering. It’d been Mike’s idea; he’d thought it made sense to get to know his interpreter a little better, since they’d be working very closely together. They could also talk shop while getting their stomachs filled, so really it was three birds, one stone.

“Yes, and a reservation has been made at the buffet,” said El, producing a file from her bag that held the hardcopy of the day’s schedule. She used it to point ahead. “I think the restaurant’s that way.”

Together they headed for the restaurant and quickly found an empty table. After draping their coats over the chairs and putting down their bags, El stopped Mike and said:

“You’re not wearing a suit.”

Mike looked down at what he was wearing. It was still pretty formal—dress shirt, tie, trousers.

“Do I have to wear a suit?” asked Mike. “I left it upstairs, I could go get it...”

“It just might leave a better impression. This country likes to formal things up.” El gave a smile. “I’ll remind you to go get your suit before we leave. And—I left a folder in the bag that holds the presentation materials. I’d like to pick that up too.”

They made for the food, and El started asking Mike about the business deal with Red Entertainment.

“It’s like a matchmaking session,” said Mike, reaching the buffet table first, and he handed El an empty plate before urging her to go before him. “My company and Red are doing the same thing in different countries, so we’re hoping we can come to an agreement where we develop their stuff in English, and they develop ours in Japanese.”

“Is it going to be an exclusive partnership?”

“Ideally, yeah. It really depends on how we negotiate the contract, but it’s still too early to say. This is our first real meeting with them. Initial contact, if you will. And *you’re* gonna make the first impression, because I can’t speak a lick of Japanese.”

“Thanks, Mike.” El’s cheek lifted in a crooked smile. “No pressure at all.”

Mike laughed, glad that they were interacting like this. In a strange way, it helped to take his mind off the whole *This-girl-looks-exactly-like-Eleven!* awkward, because the more he talked to El, who seemed like an *adaptation* of Eleven, the easier it was to forget he’d ever lost her.

El Thayer, Mike realised, was kind of like his inverted virtual reality.

She was his Upside Down.

“Oh, my god. They have waffles,” exclaimed El, giving Mike a wide grin as she loaded her plate up. “*Waffles*. For breakfast. Is this even Japan?”

A monster-free alternate dimension. An El who was in a lot less trouble, who didn’t seem to have any powers and yet, still retained the same fondness for waffles. The setting: Japan.

Perfect.

“Are you saying they don’t have waffles here?” asked Mike.

“Not for breakfast. They’re more like a dessert over here. When I

went home for Christmas I filled a suitcase full of Eggos to bring back—now I’m down to my last two boxes. It’s tragic.”

“Eggos?” Mike felt a bit light-headed. Surely the similarity didn’t extend to this?

“Yeah. You know, *Eggos*—those frozen breakfast waffles.”

“El,” Mike rolled his eyes, “I know what Eggos are.”

“Of course you do.” El gave him a slight but infuriatingly cocksure, somewhat condescending smile; and continued moving down the buffet table.

Damn, he definitely could deal with this version of the Upside Down.

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El’s badassery didn’t stop at her quiet gibes and polite sarcasm—she was also wickedly good at her job, and Mike was deeply impressed.

Red Entertainment had sprung a surprise on them—they’d deviated from the agenda and started showing Mike the animation of the *sequel* to the game Mike was most interested to get the licensing rights for. El had not been fazed by the lack of written information and was translating at a speed comparable to when there’d been a document on the table.

Hiroi, the chief creator, was getting quite excited as he introduced the additions to the cast, and El didn’t miss a beat as she interpreted simultaneously right into Mike’s ear.

“Leni is a young German girl with an abnormally high amount of spiritual power,” El followed Hiroi’s narrative, “and she didn’t have a regular childhood because she was raised to be a weapon...”

Mike’s blood ran cold as he heard the words. Was this some kind of massive prank? He turned to stare at El, who was making notes as she listened.

“—experimented upon by the military, and is thus emotionally

detached. Our protagonist strives—”

“I’m sorry,” Mike interrupted, waving his hand at the team, “could we take a break?”

All the six people in the meeting room stopped to look at Mike with varying degrees of concern. El hadn’t had to translate Mike’s request for the Japanese to understand what was going on.

Hiroi folded his hands together and leant across the table. “Mike-san, OK?”

“I’m fine,” said Mike, showing Hiroi a thumbs-up before loosening his tie.

Hiroi gave him a warm smile before telling everyone something, and all the locals got up and filed out of the room.

“Fifteen minute break,” informed El. She made no move to leave, choosing to leaf through some handouts instead.

Mike gave an apologetic grimace, exhaled, and shook his head to clear it. This was getting too surreal. Had he taken a plane into Japan, or had he somehow crossed into some Bermuda Triangle-ish, unexplained alternate dimension? Was this actually some sort of *other* Upside Down, for real? He’d basically heard El Thayer read out Eleven’s life story without so much as batting an eyelid, and it was *hella weird*.

Mike hadn’t actually figured out what had gone on with Eleven until years after he met her. At 12, things had seemed very straightforward—Eleven had superpowers that she had somehow cultivated in the Hawkins lab, which was a bad place, then one day she escaped, but the men at the lab wanted her back, and then Eleven fought a monster and... disappeared.

Mike hadn’t thought to question why the lab had been a bad place, or imagine how bad it had been.

He’d been in high school when he’d suddenly started to wonder (or perhaps he’d finally let himself wonder), and he remembered bailing on a trip to the arcade to look up old newspaper articles in the public

library (he went alone because he was too embarrassed to admit that he was still 'hung up on Eleven', and he hadn't wanted to remind Will of all the terrible things that had happened because of his time in the Upside Down).

There'd been quite a lot of press attention on Will's family after he came back—understandable, since the government had basically faked Will's death with a dummy—and several articles mentioned a thorough investigation into Hawkins National Laboratory and its hidden organisation that held experiments which sought to control the mind. Some said that they experimented on people, weaponising them so they could spy on the Commies and the Soviets.

One story led to another, and Mike also unearthed articles about a lady who had tried suing the lead scientist of the programme back in the '70s, and she'd claimed that the scientist had experimented on her child.

It didn't take a genius to put all the pieces together, and Mike had the added advantage of having interacted with Eleven personally—he knew how jumpy she had been, he'd seen her tattoo, and she'd had to ask what 'friends' and 'promises' and 'pudding' were.

That day, Mike had left the library in a wretched sobriety, wondering if he'd been better off ignorant.

Now, Mike looked at El, sitting right there beside him in that conference room in Tokyo, massaging her temples and mumbling to herself in Japanese as she read off a sheet of paper.

He suddenly wanted to touch her, just to check if she was real, but common sense told him not to.

It was just a bit too much, all these memories and happenings. A little too eerie in their coincidence, a little too blurred at the points where thought met reality. If this was all in his head, if he was currently trapped in a world that was all a lie, there should be a way to wake up.

Through the sleeve of his shirt, Mike carefully caught a piece of skin on the underside of his arm between the knuckles of his thumb and



his forefinger, and pinched hard.

He shot up to his feet, eyes watering.

“*Fuck*,” he gasped, banging his knee on the underside of the table in the process and cursing again.

“What was that for?” exclaimed El, startled.

“It hurts,” Mike winced, alternating between rubbing his arm and his leg, “but I think you’re real, so it’s all good.”

“*What?*”

“I’m just... Weren’t you bothered by that backstory? The girl who was experimented on by the military?”

El gaped at Mike, and he flushed as he realised how he sounded like he’d sympathised enough with a fictional character’s past to stop a meeting.

“Mike, it’s just a *video game*. It’s *make-believe*.” El got up from her seat. “I’m going to get you some coffee, you look like death.”

Mike didn’t know whether to be mortified or grateful, so he just gave El a weak smile, said his thanks, and slumped into his seat as he watched her leave the room.

“Fool,” said Mike out loud, covering his face with his hands.

\*\*\*

It was five in the evening, and Mike was finally convinced that he was indeed existing in the correct dimension because they’d started talking about things like audience demographics and the standardisation of design, making Mike experience, for the first time in his life, how negotiating a business deal could actually comfort his sanity.

Mike and El were seen out by the executives of Red Entertainment, and after they exited the building, El checked the schedule and said:

“It says here I get a two-hour break, including dinner, before I meet up with you again at your hotel to rehearse for the pitch.”

El slotted the file back into her briefcase. “Will you be fine on your own?”

Mike’s first thought was to ask El to stay, which came out of the blue and was wildly inappropriate, so he just shrugged and said:

“Sure. It’s just a city. And I know where the hotel is.”

“Great. You have my number?”

“Yep.”

“Give me a call if you run into any difficulties.”

“Yeah. Thanks, El. See you later.”

El gave him a wave and headed for the metro exit, disappearing down a flight of stairs. Mike made for his hotel, which was less than 10 minutes away on foot, and smiled to himself as he realised the afternoon hadn’t been a complete disaster after all.

The meeting had gone smoothly, and he now had a better idea of Red Entertainment’s business direction, which was, thankfully, in tune with his own. El was a really gifted interpreter; Mike had worked with several ever since his business had started expanding internationally, and El was definitely one of the best. Her explanations were precise, and she knew which words to choose—when they were talking about storylines, she added some dramatic flair; when they launched into corporate talk, she wasn’t afraid to throw in business jargon.

Mike could see she was very capable and very smart, and it made him blush.

It was almost as if...

*Nah*, thought Mike, he was only feeling this way because El and Eleven looked alike. It wasn’t real attraction, just his brain messing with him.

Mike reached his hotel, retrieved the key, and went up to his room. He hung up his suit (the guys at Red had been very impressed he'd come in a suit, and though they'd all been wearing suits as well they'd said it was just for the meeting—when it was just them, they sometimes just wore T-shirts and walked around the place in house slippers), changed out of his shirt and pants, and pulled on a polo tee and a pair of loose trousers. He rummaged in his suitcase for his travel guidebook, and turned to the page titled *Tokyo Eats*.

He was going to foray into Tokyo on his own. This was his Japanese campaign.

Mike grabbed a hoodie, stuffed his wallet and his keys in its pockets, and left the room to begin his solo adventure.

\*\*\*

El raised her eyebrows, clutching her briefcase closer to her body.

“Mike, *I’m on my break.*”

With a floundering ruffling of pages, Mike found the entry that listed the eatery he was—they were—lining up to enter.

“It was in the guidebook!” Mike defended, showing the dog-eared page to El for proof.

Mike was aware he sounded like some kid trying to explain to the teacher how he totally hadn't copied his friend's homework, but the panic was justified. His not-so-pleasant first encounter with El had been a mere 24 hours ago. Turning his eyes skyward, he pleaded silently for the awkward to stop. What had he done to offend the universe?

El just let out a small sigh. “I guess this place *is* pretty famous.”

Mike stilled his thoughts for one second, trying to assess the situation. To El, this was her time off, and he was basically intruding on it.

“This isn't work,” said Mike resolutely. “Right now, I'm not the client,

you aren't the consultant. We're just two people who happened to meet in a queue. You don't even have to speak to me, and when you get to the end of the line, you just say 'table for one'. I'll be totally cool with it. You got here first, you've got dibs."

El was peering at him, her almost-smile—*her Eleven smile*—dancing on her lips.

"I won't pretend we're *strangers*, Mike," she sounded only remotely exasperated, "and besides, I'm not completely averse to having you at my table."

Mike broke out into a grin. "You aren't?"

El just laughed and shook her head.

They got their table sooner than expected—the people in front of them had been a party of nine—and placed their order with the wait staff, Mike using the English menu. El taught him how to say 'pork cutlet rice bowl' in Japanese, and though Mike was pretty sure he messed up on a syllable, the server taking the order seemed to understand him. With a smile and a quick bow, their waiter ran into the open kitchen hollering their orders, and the cooks hollered back their acknowledgement.

In front of the cooking area was a counter, where some lone patrons were polishing off some rice bowls quietly, and above them hung several large, square cards with what had to be autographs scribbled on. On the walls were also pictures of some fabulous-looking people and the staff—Mike guessed this place was also celebrity-endorsed.

In their booth, El calmly took a sip of her iced water before closing her eyes and moving her neck from side to side to stretch it. She leant back with a small sigh, before opening her eyes very slowly to look at Mike, who quickly averted his gaze, afraid to be accused for staring.

El chuckled, drawing Mike's attention back to her again. She let her laughter die and her eyes drift to the side, and Mike just looked down at his lap, letting the noises of the kitchen and the chatter of the other customers substitute their could-be conversation.

Mike couldn't remember the last time he'd been so quiet with anyone at a meal. He'd grown up with two sisters, and his family always made it a point to eat together. He had three best friends all the way up till high school, and at college he'd been rather popular, so he'd had pretty loud company when it came to meals at school. The girls he'd dated had always been intellectual types, always game for a good debate, so those dinner moments hadn't been quiet either.

This, though. This was something else.

"You're a little different when you're not at work, aren't you?" said Mike, chancing conversation. "Very... mellow."

El shrugged, and simply sipped at her cup of water again.

Mike thought she was ignoring him, when she suddenly said:

"I've never met a client who's my age. I usually handle more sophisticated accounts—a lot of green energy, quite a bit of Forex—which means most of my clients are in their forties, occasionally thirties. If you didn't change your schedule the second time, your account wouldn't have come to me."

"Oh," said Mike, nodding, though he was unsure why El was telling him all this.

"It's not the first time I'm having dinner outside of work with a client," El continued, "but it's the first time I feel that I'm actually really outside of work."

El met Mike's surprised stare, and her lips relaxed into a gentle smile.

Mike's heart soared.

"I'm actually really this mellow, I guess," said El. "Few people get to see it," she tipped her cup towards Mike, "so you're very lucky."

"So it's safe to say that right now, we're... friends?" asked Mike.

"Friends, hangin' out," agreed El, grinning. She then squinted and tilted her head, as if considering something she was finding hard to believe. "It's funny, though. If you knew me—like, if you *really* knew

me—you'd know I'm not a very outgoing person. I don't make friends easily. I don't even talk that much, and trust me when I say this right now? It's 'much'."

"Oh, I trust you."

They laughed, and Mike felt a fullness in his being—this was nice. Being with El, talking to her as a friend, forgetting they had a corporate relationship—it was very nice.

"Since we're friends and our food is taking a while," Mike shifted forward in his seat, clasping his hands on the tabletop, "shall we play a game?"

El raised her eyebrows. "A game?"

"You know, *games*. Those things people do to amuse themselves."

El's mouth fell open as she realised Mike had performed a pretty clever (though belated) comeback for her Eggo quip in the morning. Her features contorted into a look of impish indignation, and she uselessly fought a grin as she called Mike a 'son-of-a', censoring the naughty part.

It made Mike want to run out into the street to scream at all the strangers about how cute she was.

"Fine then. What game?" asked El, obviously unable to stem her curiosity.

"It's called 'Friends tell each other things', and I play it at informal business gatherings a lot," said Mike. "Basically, we tell each other things about ourselves that we haven't ever told anyone before."

El rolled her eyes. "What are you, fifteen?"

"It's funny even for grownups, trust me. I don't design games for nothing, El."

"All right, fine. I'll play."

"You go first."

“Okay.” El jutted her lower lip out as she thought, then her mouth rounded into an ‘O’ as she hit upon something.

“I don’t dream,” said El proudly, tapping the table with her forefinger as she pronounced each word.

Mike gave her a sceptical look. “Is that even possible?”

El looked doubtful for a second. “Well, I don’t know the science behind it, but even if I do dream, I don’t remember any of it.”

Mike bobbed his head, shrugging. “Fair enough. I’ve heard of people like that.”

“All right, your turn.”

“That was fast,” grumbled Mike.

“Friends tell each other things’—go!”

Mike didn’t know why he thought it apropos, but everything in that moment seemed so precious and *right* and he trusted El, he really trusted her, so he said:

“I think I’m still in love with the girl I kissed when I was twelve.”

El immediately folded her lips between her teeth, eyebrows shooting up, and Mike could see she was trying to be sensitive to his feelings as she said:

“Wow. For real?”

“Yeah.” Mike let out a gush of breath. He knew it’d be suicide to add ‘and she looks just like you’, so he held his tongue.

“I’m guessing it was your first kiss?” asked El, allowing a teasing note to creep into her voice.

Mike just *blushed*. He couldn’t help it. Eager to divert her attention away from his discomfort (she was already giving him that awful, knowing smirk like she held all the answers to the world’s mysteries), he asked:

“Do *you* remember your first kiss?”

This wiped the grin off El’s face, but her eyes still shone with humour.

“I don’t have to tell you,” she said loftily.

“Uh, Ref? Thayer just committed a foul.”

“You never said this game had fouls!”

“You never asked me the rules.”

El threw up her hands. “Okay. Fine,” she hummed in thought, “I was homeschooled until twelfth grade so I didn’t really get to hang out with boys... College, I guess?”

She immediately made a face.

“Oh god, why am I even telling you this? I’m taking this game way too seriously.”

“Because, El,” Mike broke into a grin, “friends tell each other things.”

They cracked up, laughing so hard they could barely thank the server who brought them their food, and when they finally regained composure, El just had to mutter ‘these crazy foreigners’ loud enough for only Mike to hear, which sent him off again, and it took a full minute of hiding his face in his hands before Mike could calm down.

“This is nice, Mike,” said El, as she handed him a pair of chopsticks for his food. “Thank you for being my friend.”

The sincerity in El’s voice caught Mike off-guard, and as he looked at her, cheeks ruddy from laughing, obviously delighting in his company, his stomach knotted; his heart clenched. Again came the feeling of wanting to run out into the street to shout that El Thayer was fucking adorable. It was too much.

Mike took the chopsticks.

“My pleasure,” said Mike, composing himself and hoping—to the



unreliable universe—that El wasn't noticing his blush.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I really should sleep more instead of conducting eight-hour writing marathons. Just really want to finish this story before Season 2 drops. Haha.

Oh, if any of you are catching the references to canon, let me know! I've been going through the series again and again to write this, it's been loads of fun. Took me ages to figure out what the potted plant was, though. I don't have Netflix in HD, maybe that's why.

Thanks for reading! I do reply each comment I get, so feel free to leave your thoughts.

## 7. El - The train-loving gentleman

El

“Wait. Say that again?” prompted El as she raced to keep up with Mike’s presentation, making notes in Japanese on the script he’d given her.

“*That again,*” said Mike, not missing a beat.

“Honestly, Mike,” groaned El.

Mike just laughed and repeated his original line.

It was almost nine, and El and Mike were rehearsing for the pitch that was going to take place the day after. Under normal circumstances, El wouldn’t have entered a hotel room with a guy she’d just met—she was kind of traditional that way, and honestly she’d always thought of herself as someone who was more interested in pursuing meaningful relationships than having great sex. (Not that they were mutually exclusive.)

And it wasn’t like she *wanted* to sleep with Mike—oh god, no. He was a client. It was just something El never thought about, sleeping with someone she serviced. She was only sort of in the company grapevine, but she’d heard (in unnecessary detail) about how these things happened, and the thought of having anyone discussing her personal life with anyone else (at work, no less) was frightening enough to make her strap on her imaginary chastity belt whenever she met a flirtatious client.

Except now she was in Mike’s room, they were alone together, and she was fastidiously considering *not* sleeping with him; did it mean she was actually thinking about it?

“El, I just said a bunch of words in really bad Spanish and you just nodded at the script and went ‘mm-hmm’.”

El felt her ears turn hot as she snapped out of her improper, undignified musing.

“Sorry. Long day.”

Mike’s expression melted into one of concern. “You know, it is pretty late. You should get going, we can do this tomorrow. Come on—I’ll walk you to the subway.”

El had to smile.

“It’s fine, Mike. Really safe country, really close station—and technically, I don’t take the subway, I take the JR. Thanks, though,” said El, gathering her things. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Mike’s hesitation was eminent, and El wondered if she’d just made things awkward. She understood how it could’ve been interpreted: he’d tried to be a gentleman, she’d sort of pushed him away, he might have thought he did something that had her assume he was trying to make a move on her.

Wanting to assure Mike this wasn’t the case, El did something she’d never really done to her clients before—she touched Mike on the elbow and gave it a little squeeze.

“Thanks for today. It’s a joy to work with you. I’m looking forward to seeing you tomorrow.”

It was language that belonged more in El’s business emails than on her tongue, but it felt like the right thing to say, and judging by the expression on Mike’s face, it was.

“Yeah, me too,” said Mike, looking more shy than uncertain as he showed her to the door. “Night, El.”

“Night, Mike.”

They’d laughed for most of the evening, from their time at the eatery right up till they practiced Mike’s presentation for his product showcase, when they’d tackled the narrative bit of Mike’s new game. He’d been animated and in-character as he described escapades and dragons and princesses, and it amused El to no end.

She admired Mike, El realised. He had a certain courage that was rare amongst their peers—undisputedly, seeing he was 27 and already a

successful entrepreneur—and yet he was still incredibly down-to-earth. The little things he did—how he gave way to her in lines, how he spoke to service staff, the offer to walk her to the station—it all showed how kind he was. Kinder than her, definitely. And his humour—El was the sort who made acrimonious comebacks that could sometimes pass for comedy; she wasn't inherently funny. But Mike was. He was eloquent and witty, and El liked him for it.

As El rode standing on the train back to Yokohama, she hung on to a grab handle, leant the side of her head against her arm, and wondered why she was thinking so much about Mike.

\*\*\*

*A mirror.*

*A dress.*

*Bikes.*

*A town.*

*A windowless room.*

*Dead men.*

*Terror.*

*A hissing cat.*

*A bath.*

*A dark tunnel.*

*Dried leaves.*

*Bare feet.*

*Rain.*

*Mike.*

Stirring, El reached for her glasses and brought the world into focus. She checked the digital clock by her bedside. She'd woken before the alarm again.

Sighing, she pressed a button to prevent the alarm from ringing, swung her feet off the bed and sat upright before lifting her glasses to rub her eyes. It was an hour and a half before she was due to head out; she never could go back to sleep once she got up, so more rest was sadly not an option.

Maybe she could fit in a run before breakfast.

\*\*\*

They were a large firm, GoWise, and kind of niche. They'd started out as an interpretation service, until one day the bosses asked themselves—why not help plan the clients' itinerary as well?

Thus GoWise Event Solutions was born. A one-stop service that would integrate translation services and events planning. They coordinated business meetings, parties, destination weddings—all sorts of functions. Consultants accompanied the clients to every reach of their schedule, played the client's personal assistant, helped them overcome language barriers, and were paid a tidy sum for it.

El was in a department called Corporate, where Simon had always taken the tech jobs, where Chiaki took the beauty businesses, where Marcus handled the engineering sector. El was mostly in-charge of the firms that were interested in expanding their corporate responsibility horizons. Most of the 20 consultants in Corporate had their own specialty, based on their abilities and interests. If Simon hadn't deemed Mike Wheeler's account 'not that tech', El would've declined it.

To be fair, Mike's work wasn't all mercenary knights and steampunk peasants—it was actual, serious business. This was Japan, the Mecca of video games, and El was facilitating a transaction with the Japanese. If it worked out, Mike's partnership with them would make great waves within the global gaming industry.

El thought it was kinda cool.

“I see you’ve got your suit on,” said El, as Mike appeared in the elevator lobby at the appointed time of 9 AM.

“Morning, El.” Mike flipped one of the lapels of his jacket, grinning. “I was considering wearing a T-shirt and sweats after what the guys at Red said about their usual dress code, but I decided not to embarrass you.”

“I’m very touched.”

Mike laughed, and together they headed to the train station.

They were going on a tour of Red Entertainment’s creative studios, situated in the southeast corner of the metropolis and actually reasonably close by car (which El was more than willing to drive), but Mike, ever the train enthusiast, was unequivocal about taking the subway. El could only follow—he was the client, he called the shots, plus it was in the itinerary.

They passed the fare gates, and El froze as they came to the top of the flight of stairs leading down to the platform.

“It’s past nine, it shouldn’t be this crowded—” El fell quiet as she heard an announcement come on. There’d been an unprecedented obstruction further up the line, and after a string of apologies they were told a train was now approaching; passengers were advised to board in an orderly manner. The packers—station staff that helped to squeeze passengers into the trains—were waving people off the line that demarcated the platform and the hazard zone.

“Mike, maybe we should take a taxi...” El looked up to see Mike enthralled by the teeming throng, already descending the steps to join them.

“I’ve read about this,” said Mike excitedly, “and I knew you guys scheduled the meetings so they wouldn’t coincide with rush hour but this is right in front of me. I’m totally cool if you want to split up. It’s just six stops away, right?”

El found no reason to quell his boyish enthusiasm. In fact, she was

finding it quite amusing.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you—expect madness,” said El, grabbing the sleeve of Mike’s trench coat to lead him to a spot she knew would be relatively less populated. Mike beamed at her, looking overjoyed at her participation.

Minutes later, El found herself in quite a predicament: while she’d expected to be crushed by the commuting horde, most of who were grumpily and unfortunately late, she had somehow overlooked the fact that Mike was going to be part of the horde as well, and was unapologetically abusing him with her shoulder.

“El, I’m gonna bruise if you keep this up,” said Mike, wincing as he pointed his chin to her shoulder digging hard into his chest.

El gave a mirthless laugh. It wasn’t like she was travelling in comfort herself; her arms felt like they were about to be squeezed out of their sockets because she hadn’t thought to bring her briefcase up to her chest, and was now hanging onto it while sporting a pose that resembled a child trying to hold in pee.

“This monstrous ride is on you, Mike,” muttered El. “You don’t get to complain.”

“Fine, but can’t you move your arm?”

“No, Mike. I can’t move my arm.” El sighed. “Hang on.”

Taking care not to pull a muscle, El turned her head to assess the situation.

The small, balding man standing on El’s other side shot her a poisonous look—he was the victim of her other shoulder, which kept knocking against the side of his head as the train moved. She voiced an embarrassed apology before turning back to Mike, realising the best way to avoid hurting anyone any further was to face him.

Oh boy.

“Mike,” said El, steeling herself, “this is for the greater good. Don’t read too much into it.”

“Huh?”

El twisted her body and took a step sideways so she was looking at Mike head-on.

“There,” said El, “I moved my arm.”

Mike wasn’t that much taller than her when she was wearing heels (which she was), and El found herself close enough to smell his aftershave and count every freckle on his face, and notice the vein that had suddenly bulged in his reddening neck.

“El, um, could you - could you move away a little bit?”

“Are you even *here*, Mike?” scolded El. “We ride for fifteen more minutes. Bear with it.”

“No, El, your *hands*.”

El looked down at her hands, still fisted around the handles of her briefcase.

They were also pushing against Mike’s crotch.

“I am so sorry,” squeaked El, drawing her arms close to pull her bag up between them, face flaming.

“I-It’s okay. I mean,” Mike made a sorry noise in his throat, “it’s not okay, like, I didn’t think it was *okay*, not for me - *god*, what the fuck am I saying...”

El continued dragging her briefcase upwards so it hid her face. She peered up at Mike.

“Sorry,” her voice came out muffled against her bag. She was so mortified she wanted to crawl under the throng and have them trample her shame away.

Mike stared at a spot past her ear, swallowing. “Let’s, uh, change the subject?”

“Great idea,” managed El, voice feeble, squeezing her eyes shut and



thanking all the powers that be that Mike was a very emotionally intelligent person.

“So, um...” Mike’s eyes darted around, searching the air, “where did you go to college?”

“Honolulu,” El replied immediately from behind her briefcase. “UH Manoa. Excellent Japanese programme.”

“You’re from Pittsburgh,” Mike was looking at her now, eyebrows raised, “and you went to school in Hawaii?”

El was surprised Mike remembered where she was from. She’d only mentioned it in passing the previous night, when they’d been talking about how they spent such little time in the U.S. that they didn’t know what happened there that wasn’t political or disastrous.

“That’s a five-hour time difference,” continued Mike. “Mad far.”

“Yeah. I got really, really tan,” drawled El, keeping a straight face as she quipped the line she always used when people pointed out how far away she went for college.

El didn’t think it was very funny, but Mike apparently did. He almost burst out laughing, but contained it in time; El saw that he was tearing up with the effort of keeping it together. This made her crack up, and soon they were quaking with repressed laughter, aware that even with their self-control, they were disturbing the rest of the passengers who had them in close quarters and could sense every shake and hear every snort.

The carriage chose that moment to sway; El reflexively held Mike’s arm to steady him as he lunged towards her, then the train swayed back, and for a split second Mike was thrown off-balance, until he reached out and grabbed El to anchor himself.

They were now pressed up against each other in a weird hug, El’s arm sandwiched between them as she held on to her briefcase.

Sweat prickled at El’s hairline as she thought: *At least it’s not his crotch, at least it’s not his crotch.*

Clearing his throat, Mike filled their silence.

“You know, one of my best friends moved to Hawaii a couple years ago.”

El knew what Mike was doing. He was trying to pretend everything was normal, which was actually fine by El; more than fine, in fact, because she was feeling, acutely, the heat of Mike’s arm around her, and it made her face go completely hot.

“Oh really? What for?” asked El, hoping she didn’t sound too forced.

“He works for a hotel chain, and also he really wanted to live on an island. Wanted to feel how it was like to be independent, something like that.” Mike gave El a faltering smile as he adjusted the arm that was around her waist. “I’ve known Lucas since elementary school. There’s also Will and Dustin, we’re all best friends. Amazing, if you think about it. Almost twenty years.”

El nodded. “Amazing. What do Will and Dustin do?” El’s briefcase arm was getting numb, and she tried diverting Mike’s attention with the question as she inched her hand down his chest.

Mike looked grateful for the distraction.

“Will’s a researcher at Purdue—microbiology, I think. Dustin works for NASA.”

For the next minute or so they kept up quiet conversation about Mike’s brilliant best friends—El wasn’t being patronising, Lucas and Will and Dustin really did seem very outstanding—and when the doors opened at a major interchange and most of the passengers got out, they finally had the space to unhand each other.

“Longest five minutes of my life,” said Mike sheepishly, not quite looking at El as he caught onto a grab bar.

“Yeah,” El agreed, though in her heart there was a feeling—a funny, oddly marvellous feeling—that it hadn’t been entirely unpleasant, not at all.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

Do people say 'mad (adjective)' anymore? I read it was popular in the '90s, haha.

I hope the ~\*AWKWARD\*~ moments were fluffy enough to rot your teeth.

Thank you for reading this chapter! Many of you who commented have highlighted the characterisation, thank you so much for the praise. I can't take all the credit; I base a lot of Elodie on Millie. Or rather my imagination of Millie's projection of Eleven? Millie's the one who actually has to *be* Eleven, and observing Millie helps me think about how she would think about Eleven. (Same goes for Mike--I look to Finn for inspiration.) Does this make sense? Haha.

Have a beautiful day! See you next chapter.

## 8. Fern - It

### Notes for the Chapter:

Loads of original characters. LOADS.

### Fern - 1983

Fern lived alone, so she didn't have anyone to feed but herself—she had no preferences when it came to the quality of produce at a store, nor was she sensitive to differences in prices. She just shopped however was convenient for her, and that afternoon found her stopping at Bradley's Big Buy because it was on the way to the Donovans', and she needed some bottled water.

Her mouth fell open when she saw glass littering the storefront, and her first reaction was to look around for the car that had driven into the supermarket.

"Careful darling, don't step on that," said an older lady with curly silver hair, holding a broom and a dustpan as she passed the automatic doors. Fern saw she was wearing a name tag; she was a store employee.

"What happened?" asked Fern, stepping aside to let the lady—*Sally*—sweep up the fragments.

Sally shrugged. "The manager was chasing a thief when the doors shut and shattered. Saw it with my own eyes. One minute he was running, then the doors slammed shut," she snapped her fingers, "glass everywhere."

"You mean he ran through the glass?" Fern gasped.

"No, no," Sally shook her head, "the glass just broke."

Fern stared at the door, dumbfounded. At least it hadn't been a car?

"Was anyone hurt?" Fern found her voice.

"Nope," said Sally, almost finished with her task. She shook the

dustpan, making the glass clink. “Robert’s pretty shaken up though.”

“Robert?”

“The manager. Gave him a shock—the little thief hadn’t even been running, he thought he could catch up. Then the glass just... exploded.” Sally looked up at Fern. “Darling, you know, you can go on in. The rest of the store isn’t disturbed,” Sally said, not unkindly.

“Right. Yes, thanks.” Fern gave Sally a smile and inched closer to the automatic doors, hesitating for a brief moment because she actually had a choice to jump through the now-empty doorframe. She decided not to, and gingerly stepped over the threshold when the doors parted.

As she approached the beverages aisle, Fern thought about how jolly convenient it’d been for the thief that the doors had closed and the panes had broken, allowing for a smooth escape.

“Wonder whose little girl she was?”

“Looked abused, don’t you think?”

“Maybe the Forsythes?”

“The family down the street from the Byerses?”

“Their precinct is complicated, it’s understandable.”

Fern stood there in the aisle, her frown deepening as she recognised the two chin-waggers. Amy Schwartz and Lynette Gallagher, a couple of rich moms in their early twenties who’d engaged Fern’s services ever since they moved into the Andelwood area the year before. They were decent to Fern, but she often felt that listening to their conversations lowered her IQ by several points.

“Oh, Miss Fern!” twittered Amy, smiling as trivially as she sounded. “Fancy seeing you here!”

“You just missed the ruckus! An awful child *stole from the frozen food aisle.*” Lynette looked so excitedly scandalised that Fern had to fight the urge to roll her eyes. Had witnessing a juvenile criminal in action

really been Lynette's highlight of the week?

"Oh, yes. Nasty bald kid, can't believe her parents let her out looking like that," said Amy, shaking her head as she tut-tutted. "Her dress was covered in dirt, like she'd been rolling around some pig sty."

"Downright ill-bred, I'd say. And a horrible example for other kids, looking neither like a boy nor girl." Lynette sniffed.

Fern sort of pitied them, and the lives they had to lead. She chose to smile cordially, reaching for two large bottles of water.

"Taking a break from the babies today?"

"Oh yes. It's manicure day," said Amy, and she flashed her nails, prompting Lynette to do the same.

"Right." Fern remembered these were people who paid her staff to mow their lawns so they could have pretty hands. "Well, ladies—see you around. I've got weeds to pluck and seed to sow."

Fern had meant it as a joke, but Lynette and Amy actually looked sympathetic as they waved, probably pitying her for having a job.

As Fern walked to the checkout, she realised something: the thief that Sally had mentioned must've been the kid Amy and Lynette were talking about.

This meant an androgynous-looking little girl had been the smooth criminal, who hadn't been running when she'd been chased, who escaped because the door conveniently broke just as she stepped out of the store.

What were the odds?

\*\*\*

Mrs Donovan was a fussy woman, overbearing, and Fern didn't like her. She made Amy and Lynette look like saints.

"The layout is too dated," said Mrs Donovan, handing the plans for

her garden revamp back to Fern. “Are you sure you know your stuff?”

“We based this off your design, Mrs Donovan,” said Fern politely. “The one you sketched.”

It had been a mediocre sketch.

Mrs Donovan’s eyes narrowed at Fern’s reply. She gestured at the yard that they were standing in.

“If you are trying to insinuate that I don’t know my own—”

Mrs Donovan was cut short by a loud cry of “Mom!”, and Fern turned to see Mrs Donovan’s son—what was his name again?—limping towards them. He was clutching his arm, features contorted in what could only be pain.

“Oh my god, Troy!” shrieked Mrs Donovan, running down the driveway to meet him.

Oh right, thought Fern, *Troy*.

“Mom, someone attacked me!” howled Troy.

“Honey, calm down,” soothed Mrs Donovan. “Tell me everything.”

“A girl with no hair broke my arm,” said Troy through gritted teeth, fury punctuating every syllable.

Fern tilted her head in thought. Why was she hearing about badass bald girls twice on the same day?

“A girl broke your arm?” tried Mrs Donovan, brushing Troy’s hair out of his eyes.

“Yes!” yelled Troy. “We have to go the police, Mom. She’s gonna pay, that evil freak.”

It wasn’t bad language per se, but Fern still felt very uncomfortable with the way this Donovan boy behaved.

“How did she break your arm, honey?” Mrs Donovan looked puzzled.

“Did she hit you?”

“The freak has powers, Mom.” Troy’s eyes were wide and wild. “She can do things. She broke my arm *with her mind*.”

Fern felt her blood chill.

She had to call Dom.

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“You knew, and you didn’t have the decency to come and tell me she *ran away*?” Fern shouted as she slammed her fist on a lab table, making several test tubes clatter onto its surface.

“It wasn’t safe to come,” Dom answered tiredly, “there was a complete information lockdown on the inside. Everything—everyone—was bugged.”

“What?”

“They only removed the bugs today. Said they found her, didn’t need to have eyes and ears everywhere anymore.” Dom sighed. “Brenner and Callahan, the lot of them, stormed out of Hawkins Lab with guns and such. They took several vans.”

Dom hesitated.

“She flipped one, Fern. Eric Connelly was driving. He died.”

Fern stilled in horror, angry tears rushing down her cheeks.

“What are you telling me, Dom? What the hell are you trying to say?” Fern strode up to Dom and grabbed him by the arms. “Are you saying she’s a - she’s a *murderer*? Are you?”

“Calm down, Fern.” Dom gently pushed Fern away and ran his hand across the nape of his neck, looking at the floor. “I know her values have been compromised. I know that, but I also knew Eric. He wasn’t a bad man.”



Fern took a deep breath to calm herself down.

“Why did she run away?”

Dom met Fern’s eyes.

“This is just what I heard, Fern,” Dom began warily, “but she let loose something or somewhat. Last week, in fact. The day you came by. Suresh said there’s hell in the East Wing, complete biohazard, word is some people have been taken. Von Braun and Shepard come to mind, but people outside as well. And the girl—she’s running away from it.”

“‘It’?”

Dom shook his head. “Don’t know what it is.”

“And you couldn’t clue me in on any of this when I saw you on Tuesday?”

“I tried. I wanted to get you a sample, but when I got there they said I didn’t have clearance to enter. I told them I was here to take care of the waste—you know, the usual speech—and they said they were gonna contain it in the East Wing, and I didn’t need to go there anymore.”

Fern frowned. “But you’re the facilities manager.”

“Tell that to them,” muttered Dom. He gave Fern an apologetic look. “I’m really sorry, Fern.”

Fern hooded her face with her hands, distraught over the girl being missing, and guilty for flaring up at Dom. Dom was her best friend, and he had stood by her side, unwavering, for 13 years. He’d pulled her out of the darkness more times than she could count. Every day he risked his job—possibly even his life—to procure the evidence needed to bring Brenner down.

Dom didn’t deserve to be treated like dirt. His friend died that day, and his sympathy shouldn’t have been belittled.

Fern lifted her eyes. “I’m sorry about Eric, Dom.”

Dom gave Fern his best attempt at a smile. “You’re worried sick about the girl. I understand.”

They shared a moment of silence more, then Fern asked:

“Where do you think she is now?”

“Haven’t got a clue.” Dom reached over to squeeze Fern’s shoulder. “But you know they won’t kill her. She’ll be fine.”

“We’ve been consoling ourselves with that line for years,” said Fern, fresh tears surfacing, “and sometimes I wonder—is it the right thing to think? Is her being alive enough? Is that the best I can wish for her?”

Dom’s eyes grew kind, and he pulled Fern into a hug.

“You’re doing your best, Fern.”

“...I let Anita rot away.” Fern was crying now, wracked sobs that were always only reserved for Dom’s audience.

“Fern. You know that’s not true.”

“And now I’m letting her child—”

With a push, Dom held Fern at arm’s length and gave her a stern look.

“You have done your best. You are still trying. You just have to crack that code, find that genome or whatever it is that you need, and then you can save her. Right?”

Fern managed to nod, and as she repeated Dom’s words to assure herself, she let out a shuddering gasp, realising—

“Dom,” Fern’s hand flew to her mouth, “what if It is the answer?”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Hope I'm not shooting myself in the foot by posting this bit--the stuff I've imagined for Fern's arc is so

intricate that I'm nervous about getting facts and continuity wrong (since it's tied so closely to canon). Fern's bits are very hard for me to write, and I actually cry a lot when I think of her scenes because I'm so invested lol.

Thanks for reading this chapter. I appreciate all the kudos and the comments! Give me some time to reply, I promise I'll respond to each comment individually.

Have a wonderful day!

## 9. Mike - All yours

### Notes for the Chapter:

There are a few Japanese references in this chapter:

1. Dachou Club - a three-member Japanese group specialising in slapstick comedy. Their kissing gag is real, though featuring them in 1998 might be anachronistic. They've been around since the '80s and have maintained their popularity, but I don't know when their kissing gag started.

2. I hope I handled the portrayal of Japanese people at informal work gatherings with respect. While this was a slight deviation (the karaoke bit was quite exaggerated; under normal circumstances the boss would be sitting with Mike at all times, but it's not impossible that they got very friendly very fast and it turned out like this), I don't mean to demean them in any way, and I hope you interpret all my descriptions as innocuous. Personally, I enjoy the company of Japanese people very much. The behaviour of the Japanese in this story has been based on personal experience, and watching Japanese variety shows depicting similar situations.

3. Boys kissing - while my ex-colleagues have never kissed in front of me, it is fact that guys, namely the members of a band that I fangirl, have kissed when drunk. (Even if they are, reportedly, straight.) Japanese attitudes towards non-heteronormativity are comparatively more relaxed, and I hope I handled that bit with circumspection and respect.

### Mike

They'd entered a workroom, where one of the animators had Tamagotchis on his desk. Mike hadn't yet encountered the model, which surprised El ("Which industry are you in again?" she'd teased),

and as it turned out it was a Japan-only release. El asked if they could play with it—she'd gotten the same set as a Christmas gift—and explained to Mike how the virtual pets could interlock to communicate with each other, and even mate when they became adults. She taught him which buttons to press to feed them, and Mike couldn't hold his laughter in when she said the pets would grow up to be aromantic if you didn't care for them.

The exchange had awoken a shockingly clear memory of when he'd taken Eleven up to his room and shown her his action figures and dinosaurs, and how they'd taken turns on his dad's La-Z-Boy. It hadn't occurred to him then, but now Mike realised that Eleven probably hadn't had the concept of play, and as he looked at El tapping on the Tamagotchi's little screen, gleefully urging Mike to clear up the poop before it got upset, he felt an odd pain in his chest—a kind of joyful wistfulness, like he was witnessing Eleven being happy, truly happy.

*Stop it, Wheeler,* Mike reprimanded himself, and he spent a disquieted afternoon evaluating his feelings.

It just didn't seem right to keep lumping El with Eleven. No matter how much they looked alike, no matter how many mimicries of the past he was being put through by being with El (although in absolute role reversal, like during lunch when she actually taught him the Japanese word for 'pudding', that had been super eerie)—they were two different people. El had obviously grown up loved and safe, and had a scar on her wrist from an accident involving a can, not a tattoo. She was her own person, not some reincarnation of Eleven.

Fact: Mike was in love with Eleven. He'd given up denying he wasn't, years ago, and meeting El wasn't going to shake that faith.

But as these thoughts ran through his mind, Mike couldn't help but feel that he was only this confused because he was making excuses for *not* falling in love with El.

"Shit," Mike cursed under his breath as truth dawned upon him.

He was in love with both of them.

Mike bolted to his feet, making El jump.

“You okay?” El looked up from her poring of a clause in a document Mike had asked if she could check. It was the end of the work day, and the guys at Red had gone for their debrief, leaving Mike and El in a conference room. They were coming back to take Mike out to dinner, and El was supposed to go with.

Mike nodded at El, cheeks warm.

“Bathroom,” he said, giving El a smile he hoped wasn’t guilty, feeling like a lousy, two-timing bastard even though he wasn’t actually in a relationship with her, or Eleven.

Mental.

\*\*\*

“You are... very pretty!” shouted Shogo in heavily-accented English, jabbing his finger in El’s direction, making Mike and El exchange a look of amusement.

They were an hour into the dinner—in a fancy private room at a fancy restaurant where they all sat on fancy large cushions on as fancy a floor made of straw could be—and all the Japanese had gotten quite uninhibited, thanks to their inebriation. Two of them had asked to play a ‘Westerner’s game’, whatever that meant, and El suggested *Friends tell each other things*, since Mike had mentioned he played it with business associates during informal work gatherings.

There were five Japanese—Hiroi, their boss; Amano; Fujii; Keita and Shogo, all men. Keita and Shogo had asked Mike and El to call them by their first names, which El explained was significant, since they were basically giving Mike and El permission to be no-holds-barred friendly with them.

Keita and Shogo were the youngest, and Mike had thought them to be quiet, strait-laced twenty-somethings; reverent, even, in their superiors’ presence; but now that they were imbibed, they didn’t seem to mind throwing compliments to El with their boss right in the background.

Then again, Hiroi was singing karaoke at the top of his voice, Amano and Fujii pouring him glass after glass of beer as they joined in at the chorus.

Keita had a stupid grin on his face as he thought of something he hadn't yet told anyone, and after a while he faced El to say:

"I want be your boyfriend!"

Then he giggled and slumped against Shogo, who cheered for him and said something in Japanese which made El grin and say something back, wagging her finger.

El was in complete work mode, Mike could tell. She was careful to keep the mood light so as not to offend anyone, and mindful of her role as the go-between for Mike and his potential business partner. Right now, Mike was The Client, and funnily enough, he felt protected by El—she was having his interests at heart, no matter if it was just her doing her job.

"This is a bit of a culture shock," Mike looked at El, "I always had the impression the people of this country were very dignified."

El laughed and took a sip of her oolong tea. She wasn't drinking that night. "Get some alcohol in a Japanese person, and more often than not they become college kids," murmured El, pointing her glass at the men on the other side of the low table.

Shogo and Keita were discussing something, and they suddenly turned to Mike and El, twinning with the gleam in their eyes.

"Do you have boyfriend?" Shogo asked El in English, looking sly.

El, drinking her tea, gave a small shake of her head.

Keita put on his goofy smile, this time for Mike. "Do you have girlfriend?"

"No," answered Mike.

The two men looked at each other for a beat, then they launched their fists into the air and yelled:

“Kiss, kiss, kiss, kiss, kiss!”

“Oh, no. No kiss,” said Mike immediately, holding up his hands, instantly embarrassed and hoping he wasn’t giving his feelings for El away. He glanced at El, who was looking straight ahead, taking a conveniently long sip of her drink.

Shogo said something to Keita very enthusiastically before they knelt to face each other, their expressions suddenly changing, and they started shoving each other on the shoulder.

El choked on her tea.

“What’s going on?” Mike was completely befuddled. “Why are they fighting?”

El was laughing so hard, Mike had to strain his ears to make out her words.

“There’s this comedy group in Japan that has a running gag where the members would pretend to have an altercation,” El paused for breath, and Mike saw that Keita and Shogo were moving closer and closer as they pushed each other angrily, “and when one of them calls for a truce, they would—”

Keita and Shogo held onto each other’s arms and kissed.

Mike gaped; El dumped her face into her hands and said something in a string of Japanese that Mike took to mean ‘oh my god you guys’.

Mike wasn’t surprised because Shogo and Keita were men and they were kissing; he was surprised because it didn’t seem like a big deal for a man to kiss another man in front of some new friends, and frankly it was a rather refreshing take on things.

The beaming pair turned to Mike and El and, from their hearty gestures and calls of ‘You! You!’, were requesting for them to do the same.

“I’m not kissing you,” Mike told El flatly, still extremely self-conscious.



“No one’s kissing me tonight—this is *your* function, Mike. *I’m* at work right now.” El smiled. “And that means I’m going to be very professional about things.”

El leant across the table and explained something to Keita and Shogo, and they laughed before making sounds that Mike surmised were the Japanese version of ‘aw, too bad’.

“What did you tell them?” asked Mike.

“That you’re very conservative and are saving yourself for marriage.”

“*You didn’t*,” said Mike in horror.

El just gave him a maddening grin.

“Professional, my ass,” Mike mumbled, huffing. He grabbed his beer and turned away from El, pretending to drink, but actually smiling into his glass.

Mike despaired of El in the best way possible. She had a dry wit that wasn’t acerbic, and in her humour was a sarcasm that wasn’t injurious. Yes, he kept getting one-upped by her and it was infuriating, but it was, at the same time, very cute.

Mike could totally deal with cute.

There was an exuberant sort of grunt from Hiroi next; he was easily the drunkest in the room, and he clapped Mike on the shoulder, saying something. Mike didn’t have to understand Japanese to know he was slurring.

“He asks if you’re having fun,” El translated, and Mike gave Hiroi a thumbs-up.

Hiroi held up his hand—“High touch!”—and Mike slapped it, laughing. El confirmed that ‘high touch’ did indeed mean ‘high five’, and Mike thought the expression made a lot of sense.

Hiroi then beckoned for Shogo and Keita to go over. They immediately got to their feet to shuffle across the *tatami* and join him at the karaoke machine. Mike was very impressed at how they

suddenly managed to look completely sober.

Amano and Fujii looked relieved as the younger men went over, as this was their cue to go back to their food. They engaged Mike and El in polite conversation as they ate, and when the servers came into the room to clear their glasses and take their new drink orders, Mike felt compelled—maybe it was the alcohol working—to tell El what was on his mind.

“For the record,” Mike found the courage to bump his arm against hers, “I didn’t kiss you not because I don’t want to.”

El laughed, shaking her head, and she said with a flick of her hand:

“You don’t have to explain, Mike. You have your girl.”

Mike was bewildered.

“Who?”

El raised her eyebrows. “I thought you haven’t forgotten the girl you kissed when you were twelve?”

And there it was—enormous and intimidating in its crippling clarity—a revelation. Mike had to confide in El if he wanted peace of mind, if he wanted to free himself from the beautiful yet shackling memories of Eleven. He had to find a way to tell El that the girl he loved was the very one who looked like El, and it was the similarity that had him so taken from the first moment he set eyes on her at the airport. He opened his mouth, ready to confess, when he realised something was very wrong.

El’s face had taken on an ashen hue, and her eyelids fluttered as she released an unsteady breath and dipped her head, a hand bracing her brow.

Mike stalled, worry gripping him.

“El?” He touched her arm.

“Headache,” El’s voice was barely a whisper as she fumbled at her side for her briefcase, “sorry, hang on.” She got her briefcase open,

then stared at its contents in dismay.

“Crap,” she moaned softly, collapsing against the table, “my pills are in another bag.”

In his mind’s eye, Mike had several horrific visions of El lying on her side, veins marbling her skin, her hands ice-cold.

Then he realised he wasn’t imagining El; he was remembering Eleven.

“Do you need to go to a doctor?” asked Mike, his anxiety full-blown.

“I-I’m fine, I think I just need to go home.” El grimaced. “Sorry, I know we’re not done for the night. I’ll get the office to file for proration.”

“Don’t worry about that now,” said Mike, gathering his things and picking up El’s coat. “Come on, let’s get you home.”

With Mike’s help, El got up to her feet and exchanged a few brief words with Hiroi and company. They looked alarmed when they caught sight of El’s pallor, and Amano very kindly helped to carry some of their things so Mike could support El with both hands.

“Taxi?” asked Amano, and El whispered yes.

They sat in the waiting area at the front of the restaurant as Amano requested for reception to phone a taxi. After apologising to Amano for the trouble she was causing, El kept her head down and lips parted as she drew in breath after shaky breath, fisting her hands in her lap.

“You can lean on me,” said Mike quietly, offering a shoulder.

Saying her thanks, El angled herself against Mike; as he looked at her, so suddenly frail, he imagined the pain she was going through, and it made his heart ache terribly.

“El, please let me send you home.”

“No.” El turned her face up at him, and it must have taken a lot of

effort because she squeezed her eyes shut, a deep crease forming in the middle of her forehead. "You should - you should go back and get ready... for the pitch. I'll be fine after some painkillers."

"El. Listen. You're in no shape to go home alone." Mike looked up as Amano signalled for them to proceed to the porch. "Please. You've helped me so much this trip, let me do something for you."

There was a beat of silence, then El threaded her hand through the crook of Mike's arm.

"Fine. I'm all yours."

Mike gave her a small smile, had her tighten her hold on his arm, and together they rose to make for the exit.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Thank you so much for dropping by and reading this! Things are going to get quite plot-heavy from now on. I hope I manage the drama well. There's going to be a lot of it starting next chapter, but we'll also see how El and Mike get closer through their pursuit of the truth. And Fern! The Fern/Eleven bits are going to feature quite importantly, and we'll finally meet the other key people like Joyce and Hop. Yay.

Rest assured, there won't be any angst. I find that people often misunderstand the word 'angst'. 'Angst' means a feeling of anxiety (or remorse) that's often unspecific. No one is going to be feeling a directionless moodiness, that's for sure. Everyone will have their own struggles, they will know exactly why they have them, and they will very bravely meet them head-on, trying their best to resolve them. Because we all know Mike's brave and obstinate, and Eleven's a survivor. Why Mike gave up looking for her, though... There's a reason why.

I hope you stick around for the ride, because I'm very excited to show you how things pan out!

Leave a comment if you'd like to strike up conversation; I really care for my readers, and want to connect with them. I've also started a tumblr account to de-stress: following Stranger Things accounts and posting audio clips of my life and thought processes as I tackle this fic, and get to know this fandom more. You can find out more about me in my profile :)

Have a wonderful day!

## 10. El - Because you're everything worth knowing

### Notes for the Chapter:

Just one small pronunciation tidbit for those of you not familiar with Japanese:

1. Junko - the name of one of El's colleagues in this story, pronounced 'june-koh'.

### El

“Is it a migraine?” asked Mike after a while, when El stopped pressing her temples with her thumbs.

El felt her lips tense up as she thought about what the headache was. She'd avoided going down that road because she didn't want to think the worst of it—plus the doctor who gave her the painkillers had said there was nothing wrong with her—but it just made sense to connect the dots and trace the cause of her pain to her surgery.

“When I was thirteen,” El began slowly, keeping her eyes closed, “I had brain surgery. To remove a tumour. If you sort of sift through my hair, you can actually see the scar.”

For a long second there was only the sound of the turn signal clicking, and El held onto the sides of her head, wincing as the cab made a right. She was currently not a big fan of motion.

“Okay.” Mike sounded nervous, and El knew she'd worried him.

“I don't know if this has anything to do with that, but a couple of weeks ago the headaches started. Well, *a* headache. It lasted for days, and I had to take leave from work. The doctor said it's probably just stress, and the pain did go away with prescription painkillers, but ever since then I've been having these - these episodes. Sometimes I catch it, like I can actually feel it coming on, so I nip it in the bud with the medicine, but that sure didn't happen today.”

There was a pause.

“So you think the tumour’s back?” asked Mike, his voice quiet.

“I really don’t know.” El let out a sigh. “I hope not.”

El sucked in air through her teeth as the car leapt forward, filtering onto the motorway; it felt like her brain had just slammed against her skull. She put up a hand to pin her forehead against the seat, but it wasn’t doing much good—her head was still sort of lolling about.

Then there was a rustle of fabric, and in the next moment Mike’s hand was encouraging and warm against her face as he gently tilted her head so it rested against his shoulder.

This man.

“Rest,” whispered Mike, folding his fingers together as he returned his hands to his lap.

El shut her eyes and tried to quiet the drumming of her heart. “Thank you.”

It was a long ride from the restaurant back to Yokohama: 80 minutes, thereabouts. The fare would be through the roof, but El really couldn’t imagine dealing with the train in her state.

She felt sorry that she hadn’t been able to deliver professionally that night, what with having to leave the dinner early, but a part of her actually felt pleased when she realised that without her headache, she wouldn’t get to share this moment with Mike.

“Oh god,” muttered El out loud as she thought about what a giant sap she was being.

“Hm?”

“Nothing,” El answered quickly, feeling the heat creep up her cheeks. She hoped Mike couldn’t feel it through his coat or something.

And then she thought about how obviously impossible it was for Mike to feel her blush through his coat, and how infatuation was really dumbing her down, and that processing all this nonsense was definitely going to tax her poor, wounded brain.

Fine. She liked Mike.

Done. Confessed. Case closed.

...Because, what was there not to like? He was a real gentleman, first impression notwithstanding, and seriously—those eyes. So intriguingly inviting and man-pretty and he probably didn't even know it because he was busy making her laugh.

And hell, why stop at the eyes and the personality? He had that face, that *fucking gorgeous face*, good God—those features that spelt definition, so sharp they could probably cut glass. God bless his parents and their genes.

In sum, Mike Wheeler was an incredibly attractive human being.

*There, Thayer, ya happy?* El wanted to roll her eyes at herself.

She knew Mike liked her as well—she wasn't blind—but El thought it bad timing. Mike was going home the next day; she didn't want to start anything she couldn't finish. El was a young American expatriate in Japan, the kind of person most familiar with the concept of how people, awesome or not, came and went in life. It wouldn't surprise her if Mike and her never met again after tomorrow. These things happened.

Furthermore, El wasn't looking for romance at the moment. She'd ventured across the Pacific to have a really awesome career—she'd barely tasted success, and didn't want to be tied down. Not now, and especially not to someone who didn't even live on the same continent. Even if they had been in the same locality, Mike was pretty much everywhere else these days—he'd shown off his passport's single blank page. It'd be wiser to spare herself the heartache of a long-distance relationship (she knew from experience she wasn't cut out for those) and stop thinking about Mike as a potential... whoever.

Besides, not wanting to start a romantic relationship with Mike didn't mean she couldn't express her platonic feelings for him. There were plenty of those to go around.



“Mike, can I tell you something?” she mumbled, eyes still closed.

“Yeah?”

“When I first met you, I thought you were a rich, self-entitled playboy.” El poked Mike’s bicep. “I was wrong.”

Mike laughed, then apologised for the movement. El said she was fine, and tucked her face further into the crook of his neck and his shoulder.

Teasingly, Mike asked:

“Is it my turn now?”

“What do you mean, ‘your turn’?”

“Didn’t you just start a round of ‘Friends tell each other things’?”

El gave a soft chuckle. “Sure. Go ahead.”

Several seconds passed. Mike was putting a lot of thought into this.

“When I first met you, I couldn’t... dissociate you with someone from my past,” Mike was really choosing his words, “but now I see that you’re your own person. You’re something else, El. Truly something else. I’m very glad we met.”

El’s heart thudded against her chest. *Dammit, Mike Wheeler.*

El readjusted the angle of her head, keeping the touch light so Mike wouldn’t misunderstand her affection. He was being ridiculously perfect, and in his company, El felt sheltered and even—dare she think it?—*loved*. It transcended friendly attraction and flights of romance—what she felt from Mike was something deeper, something that felt like trust and protection and loyalty. Being with him made her experience a tremendous comfort, and an empowering courage.

Through another surge of pain, El found the gumption to say:

“You know we’re talking about our first impressions of each other as if we didn’t just meet three days ago?”

Mike snorted, and El just smiled into his coat. A thought came to mind, and since El was feeling exceptionally brave, she decided to go ahead and tell Mike something she'd never told anyone before.

"My turn," she said.

"We're still playing the game?"

El hummed to say yes. "You know that craniotomy I was telling you about?"

"Uh huh."

El paused, immersing herself in the complete unfamiliarity of the situation. These were things she'd never confided to anyone, but for some reason she *really* wanted to tell Mike. Maybe it was because she wanted to validate, to herself, that Mike was special. Maybe she wanted him to understand that he was important to her. Maybe she just wanted them to share something that was intangibly theirs.

Maybe she needed to know that Mike didn't mind this part of her.

"Well, I woke up from surgery with all my memories gone. This means everything I am today has been constructed over the past fifteen years—some of it painstakingly, some of it slapdash."

El let out a small, breathy laugh.

"I, quite literally, lost my childhood. But maybe it was for the best, because according to my mom, who's actually not my biological mom, I was in a really messed up foster home before I went to live with her. It might have done me good to forget. I don't know."

El couldn't see Mike's expression from her perch on his shoulder, but he'd turned his face towards her and gone very still.

El squeezed Mike's arm. "There. My dark and twisted past. Just thought I'd tell you as a going-away present. Sorry if it's weird."

"No, El." Mike's voice came out as a rasp, and he cleared his throat. "Thanks for telling me something so personal."

They remained very quiet for a long stretch of expressway, and El assumed Mike was trying to digest this new bit of information. She didn't blame him for finding it difficult; if her new friend whom she had become very fond of very quickly suddenly told her that they had no recollection of their first twelve years of existence, she'd be battling curiosities to find the most sensitive way to ask: *So, how's it like being an adopted amnesiac?*

Finally, Mike said:

"How's the headache?"

El assessed her pain. "It's an ebb and flow; still bad, but not as bad as it was at the restaurant. Might get worse later."

Mike nodded, and El saw that he kept fiddling with his fingers: gripping them, alternating them, massaging the base of his thumb joint. El wondered if learning about her past had made him uneasy.

"El, just wondering—have you always lived in Pittsburgh?"

*That's an awkward train of thought*, thought El, as she tried to link Mike's question to her confession.

"According to my mom, yes. I was adopted in the state of Pennsylvania, so."

"You've never - you've never lived in Indiana?" Mike caught himself. "Sorry, you might not remember—"

El lifted her head to look at Mike. "Aren't *you* from Indiana?"

"Y-Yeah."

Mike was stuttering. Why? And what was up with Indiana?

But if they were talking about Indiana...

"I've never lived there, but my mom did for a while. She still has some friends there; we get Christmas cards from them every year. I've never actually met them, except for my Uncle Dom—I've never been able to figure out whether or not he's my mom's boyfriend—but he

moved away from Indiana at some point to come and live near us.”

“Did your mom ever mention where exactly she lived? Or do you know where her friends are from?”

“They’re from all over so I don’t remember, but she and Uncle Dom lived in some small town—Dawkins?” El frowned. “Wait, that doesn’t sound right...”

Mike took a sharp intake of breath. “Hawkins?”

“Oh, right. That’s the one.”

The streetlights rushing past them outside illuminated Mike’s face in a flickering pattern of shadows, and El could see that he was looking just like the first time she’d met him: pained, uncertain and afraid.

El was about to probe when she felt as if a hammer had just struck her skull, and she groaned as she pressed a fist to her forehead.

It hurt. A lot.

“El, I’m sorry,” said Mike, suddenly flustered, “I asked too many questions. You should - you should rest. I’ll wake you up when we stop, okay?”

“Good idea,” said El, curling up against the upholstery, not wanting to invite herself over to Mike’s shoulder without him initiating contact. He remained quite stationary, staring out of the window, looking very faraway and not making any offers for her to lean on him.

By the time they entered Yokohama, El was fast asleep.

\*\*\*

*Grey suit, dark tie, silver hair.*

*Warm hands.*

*Cold hands.*

*Dark skin.*

*Bandana, corduroy, backpack.*

*Lab coats.*

*Frizzy raven hair.*

*A lisp.*

*Long curls, kind eyes.*

*That flannel shirt.*

*Nervous nail-biting.*

*A beard, a smile, a gunshot.*

*A kiss.*

El opened her eyes to a very startled Mike.

“I was about to wake you,” said Mike, catching his breath. “Do you always wake so suddenly?”

As El tried to get her bearings, Mike came into focus. Their gazes locked, and a shock of sorrow crashed upon her like a wave; then there was something: flagrantly heavy, sinking into the bottom of her heart and boring a hole inside her. It was a sensation so foreign, the taste of a loss so deep that it filled her eyes with hot tears; it was affliction and longing and dysphoria all at once—it was an echo of a dream.

And looking at Mike made it worse.

“El, are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re crying.”

El wiped her face with the back of her hand. “You’d cry too if you had this headache, Mike.”

El gathered her things and asked the cab driver if he could issue her a receipt, and after a quick discussion with Mike, asked if the driver could wait there for Mike while he sent her up to her apartment, then give him a ride to Shin-Yokohama Station. The man readily agreed, and reset the meter.

El made an irritated noise through her nose as her head pounded with every step. Her pain felt like it had crests and troughs, and she was definitely in a crest right now.

The pain wasn't enough to distract her from thinking about her post-nap experience, however. It baffled her: what had made her so upset that she cried when she saw Mike's face upon waking? It couldn't be that she was already missing him, was it? That was crazy. She'd only known him two and a half days.

"You'll be okay on your own?" asked Mike, helping her into the elevator.

"Yes. Nothing painkillers and a hot shower can't fix."

The doors slid shut, and El propped her head against the cool metal wall, closing her eyes. She wondered if talking about her feelings would help her feel less crazy.

"Mike, I think I had a dream just now. In the taxi."

"I thought you said you don't dream."

"Maybe I just never remembered my dreams."

"Do you remember what you dreamed just now?"

"No." El paused. "But I have this *feeling*... It's odd, but I think I dreamed of you."

As the words left her she realised how they sounded like, and El quickly turned to Mike to declare it wasn't anything weird, but she forgot she was in a crest and ended up moaning in pain as her head protested against the movement.

"I don't think it was anything pervy," El managed to get out as the

elevator stopped at her floor.

“Yeah, of course.” Mike finally afforded a real smile. “Says the person who felt me up on the train this morning.”

“...Go on, bring that up. Make my headache worse, will you?”

Mike laughed, and El was relieved he seemed to have shed the moody pensiveness that had plagued him in the cab, though she remained curious about it.

They got to El’s apartment, and Mike helped to hold her briefcase as she dug around in it for her keys.

“Thank you for accompanying me home,” said El as she unlocked the door and Mike held it open. “You really didn’t need to. You’re the *client*. I’m supposed to be taking care of you.”

They faced each other in the entryway; Mike gave El a smile, a small one that had one of his cheeks lift.

His eyes, however, were looking sad again.

“Why the long face, Mike?” asked El, keeping her voice gentle.

“Nothing,” replied Mike a little too quickly, “just tired.”

El looked at him, sceptical.

Mike shifted his eyes to the floor. “And sad that I’m leaving tomorrow.”

There was something unspoken there, and if El wasn’t busy fighting her headache she would’ve blushed.

“Taxi’s waiting,” reminded El, “you should get going. Big day tomorrow. We’re meeting at 11 AM, if I’m not mistaken.”

Mike nodded, stepping away from the door. “Give me a call if you need to give the pitch a miss.”

“That won’t happen,” El assured him, “I’ll be armed with an arsenal

of painkillers.”

Laughing, Mike waved and made for the elevator. ““Night, El.”

““Night, Mike.”

\*\*\*

Many of El’s epiphanies came to her in the shower. On several occasions, standing under the water would help her recall, reflect on and comprehend her day, and as she stared off into the steam she arrived at a peculiar, not-entirely-improbable hypothesis: what if *she* was the girl from Mike’s past?

El evaluated all the interactions she’d had so far with Mike. What he’d said to her when they first met, how he’d behaved in the train from the airport, how he’d looked at her...

...Oh god.

If that girl who looked like her wasn’t just an ex, but the very same one Mike had been in love with since he was a kid, it would mean Mike was *in love with El’s pre-surgery self*.

What? Had she been together with Mike in her childhood? Had it been some first-love-over-the-summer kinda thing?

El exhaled to calm herself down. Her brain was whirring; she didn’t want to sabotage the painkillers when they were doing such a fine job of stopping her headache.

“Okay, El,” she said out loud, “let’s take this step by step.”

El switched off the water, arranging the facts in her head. Mike had mentioned he’d been 12. That was 15 years ago—probably about the same time El had had surgery. That part of the timeline matched up.

What had Mike said about the girl again? *She was someone he missed*. What did that mean? Had she died? Or had she gone missing?

*Questions later. What else?*



The girl had a tattoo, El remembered, and she put the scar on her wrist close to her face to examine it. It wasn't impossible, El realised, for this to be the product of some kind of excision removal.

She'd had this scar since forever. She'd asked her mother about it when she was younger, and had been told it was from some minor kitchen accident.

El chewed on her lip. Had her mother been telling the truth?

El knew her mother wasn't entirely forthcoming when it came to revealing things about her past, since it'd been so purportedly turbulent. It wasn't like Fern lied to El aggressively—no, Fern was an inherently good person and really, El couldn't see why she'd have to lie about a scar—she just withheld information, and seemed to only want to reveal El's old behaviours without all the happenings.

Growing up, this had been a problem. As El journeyed her late teens, she'd been obsessed with 'finding herself', and wanted to be told about her years in the foster care system. Fern had thought otherwise, and they'd fought uglily because of it.

Fern's answers weren't always vague, however. When El asked if she'd been raped, or beaten or starved, Fern had always given a vehement 'no'. That, at least, was clear—but it also frustrated El, because honestly she couldn't think of anything worse and thus, found Fern's evasiveness even more unfair.

It'd been one of the reasons why El had chosen a college so far away. El knew how much Fern loved her, and the wickedest part of her intended to punish her mother with the distance.

Somewhere in her sophomore year El excavated her pride and realised that, with the omission of most parts of her childhood, her life wasn't any better or worse. She didn't have to know the entirety of her past to find herself—she could do that by struggling with the currency of college life.

She made up with her mother shortly after that, finally understanding how fiercely Fern had tried to protect her. It had been pure parental instinct on Fern's part, and El was older and wiser enough to accept

there were always some things better off not knowing.

But not this.

This involved Mike, so El didn't think she was better off not knowing.

Quickly towelling off, El put on her glasses and switched on the modem so the internet could start while she changed. It was time to investigate.

Mike had asked her about whether she'd ever lived in Indiana. Then he'd asked about her mother. Had they been neighbours? El needed to find out.

El shook her mouse to bring her computer out of sleep mode and typed a few choice keywords into the search box.

*Michael Wheeler one campaign more indian hometown*

El held her breath as she clicked on an interview in a gaming e-zine, skimming the article before her eyes landed on the words:

*Wheeler, who's a native of Hawkins, Indiana*

El leant back heavily in her chair, her palms clammy as she brought them together, raising her fingers to her lips, thinking. She accessed the timeline in her head again. Something didn't match up.

Fern had been quite explicit about El having met her in *Pittsburgh*, not Hawkins. If Fern had adopted her in Hawkins before they moved to Pittsburgh, this would all make sense. Why was there a discrepancy?

Could it be that part of El's past had taken place in Hawkins?

And why was Fern trying to hide it?

\*\*\*

It was supposed to rain from noon throughout the rest of the day, and El made a mental note to borrow an umbrella for Mike at the hotel

before they left for Red Entertainment. Then she remembered the episode at the airport with Mike's welcome sign, and grudgingly uncapped a marker to write the word 'umbrella' on her palm.

"Morning, El. You're early," said Simon in his glorious Australian accent, hauling his briefcase onto his desk in the cubicle beside El's.

"Hi, Simon." El spun in her chair to face him. "Do you happen to know where the forms for invoice adjustment are?"

Simon offered El an apologetic smile as he turned on his computer. "You gotta ask Junko. Sorry."

"Oh, no, I thought as much. Thanks anyway."

"You gotta get something prorated?"

"Yes. Got a headache last night and had to leave work early."

"No! Didn't you just take a few sickies for that last week?"

"I did, three days. It's not completely gone, I guess. But I feel fine now."

Simon gave a sympathetic nod. "You still on the Wheeler account?"

"Yeah, last day. He's leaving tonight."

"Again, thanks for taking it, you helped heaps. And he's not a bad guy, isn't he? Mike Wheeler. Spoke to him on the phone last week, very friendly."

"Yeah," El couldn't help but think: *Oh Simon you have no idea*, "he really is."

The doors to the office swung open, and in stepped Junko. El walked over and beamed at her, making her slow down.

"Good morning, El," said Junko warily, rounding the corner of her desk, "it's not even nine yet, what do you need?"

El had a reputation in GoWise for being very enthusiastic about her

job, and while she and Junko got along fine, El knew she sometimes asked a favour too many of the administrative department. Still, Oliver the Intern was here for a couple of months; El was sure Junko could delegate him some tasks.

“I can’t find the invoice adjustment forms,” said El.

“They’re right—” Junko pulled open an empty drawer. “Ah, we’ve got to print more.” She squinted at the clock, jutting her lips out in displeasure. “That Oliver. Never early, never late. I’ll do it for you, then.”

“Thank you,” sighed El appreciatively. “I need to leave by ten, so anytime before then...?”

“Sure.” Junko then looked at Simon and El before pointing her index finger, remembering something.

“You guys haven’t come to the office in a while,” said Junko.

“You know we’ve been out with clients,” said Simon, clacking at his keyboard and not looking at Junko.

“Yes, but it means you guys don’t know about Durham. They cancelled, did you hear?”

El raised her eyebrows. The Durham Corporation, a conglomerate headquartered in Britain, was one of their biggest clients, and usually a convoy of interpreters would be attached to their 100-attendee-strong, week-long annual conference.

“They’re not coming?” asked El.

“Yes, something to do with a scandal, I’m not very sure. Point is,” Junko started grinning, “this means we’re entering a lull. One lazy week coming right up.”

“Ace!” exclaimed Simon, raising his fists in the air. “I can make my son’s sports day!”

“And I’ll be at my desk finishing the paperwork that piled up during the days I called in sick,” said El gloomily, returning to her cubicle.

“Thanks, Junko. *Yoroshiku* on the form.”

“Yup, I’ll get it to you,” promised Junko, switching on the printer by her desk.

It all felt so *normal* to El, being in that office, talking to her colleagues, handling the blasted paperwork. This was her life. It was great. She loved it. Why was she trying to rock the boat by digging into her past?

Right, *Mike*. El’s heart danced in her chest. She was doing it because of Mike.

**From:** El Thayer < notmelodie@hotmail.com >  
**Sent:** Thursday, March 5, 1998 08:49 AM +0900  
**To:** Fern Thayer < fern\_thayer@hotmail.com >  
**Subject:** Re: Mom Notes #161

Hi Mom! Thanks for your newsletter thingy. Love you.

I’m at work and it’s 10 minutes before the day starts so, quick question: before my surgery, was I ever in Indiana? Had I lived there, or maybe visited? Short visits count too, maybe like a summer at Uncle Dom’s house, or tagging along when you visited your friends? Just wondering.

I have to go, got a mountain of work stuff to clear. I love you! Talk to you soon.

El

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Yes, the dream sequence was totally the characters that had been in Eleven’s life when she was 12. I put Fern and Dom in there as well. Hope I didn’t miss anyone out.

## 11. Fern - Montauk

### Fern - 1984

Explaining to Eleven why she had to sort her clothes was a chore in and of itself—the girl had just learnt how to operate the washing machine, and she didn't seem to mind that half the whites she owned were now a pale shade of blue.

Fern wished she could be as cavalier when it came to her favourite cream blouse—also a victim of that dastardly pair of jeans—but alas.

The day's chores were almost done; they'd unpacked the last of the boxes and were officially set up in their new home—well, Eleven's new home, seeing that this was where Fern grew up. The charming foursquare residence her parents left her had been rented out since 1967, and Fern had entrusted its management to a real estate agency during the years she'd been in Indiana. They provided excellent customer care, even sending people to play custodian when a tenant vacated the property; of course, their services corresponded to their price tag.

Having had the custodian didn't mean they could shirk their cleaning responsibilities, however. Fern and Eleven worked on tidying up the house throughout their first week in Pittsburgh; it hadn't had a tenant for months and contained a city of dust. Fern could tell Eleven wasn't very fond of the vacuum cleaner, frowning deeper each day when the time came to hoover. She didn't like the noise it made, Fern guessed, getting better at reading Eleven's moods.

"Baby, I think your work here is done. It's very clean," said Fern, entering the dining room. "Great job."

Eleven switched off the vacuum, looking quite relieved. She went to pull the plug out from the outlet and started winding the cord over her palm and under her elbow, the way Fern had shown her.

Then she stopped and looked at Fern.

"Fern, why do you call me 'baby'?"

This caught Fern by surprise. It'd happened so naturally that she hadn't even noticed she'd applied the endearment.

"Well," Fern tried to rationalise her motivations, "calling you 'Eleven' seems a bit distant, especially since I knew you, sort of, before you became a little girl. You know, when you were the size of a pear in your mommy's belly. Okay—I didn't actually see you get born, so I never met you as a baby-baby, but, uh..."

Eleven was listening intently, waiting for the explanation to culminate.

Fern took a deep breath.

"I guess what I'm trying to say is," Fern scratched her nose with her thumb, suddenly feeling shy, "I loved you even before I met you: when you were still that pear." Fern paused, peering into Eleven's face. "You don't hate it when I call you 'baby', do you?"

"No." Eleven's voice was soft, and Fern was comforted to see the corners of her lips quirk.

"Do I call you..." Eleven's gaze turned serious, "Mom?"

Fern's eyebrows peaked, and there was a flutter in her heart.

"Only - only if you want to," said Fern breathlessly, her eyes misting up.

"Yes," said Eleven.

Fern's face crumpled, and she pulled Eleven into a hug.

"The past three weeks have been this whirlwind of change for you," choked Fern, "I knew it was a lot to take in, and I didn't want to load you up with even more decisions. You barely know me, and I was so afraid you wouldn't like me enough to want me as your mom, you know?"

Eleven nodded. "I understand."

Fern dried her tears with her sleeve and sniffled, holding Eleven's

shoulders to look at her.

“I’m still worried you don’t fully understand what it means to be here with me.”

“I do.” Eleven pressed her lips into a line. “We need to get away from the bad men. Hide from them.”

Fern nodded and sighed, placing her hand on Eleven’s head, smoothing down a stray lock of hair with her thumb.

Chief Hopper had made up a story for the current proprietors of Hawkins Laboratory, claiming how Eleven had disappeared. It was believable, seeing that she’d managed to escape even the lab. The problem was that the CIA were still looking for her, and Eleven knew the only way out of that was to make them stop wanting her.

It meant she had to lose her powers.

“I need you to know that when I developed the formula for the serum—the medicine—I didn’t know it would impede memory functions,” said Fern.

“Impede...?”

“Make you forget things,” said Fern heavily. “I just wanted to stop people from exploiting you. Seeing you as a weapon. As a threat. Do you know what I mean?”

Eleven nodded, closed her eyes and slipped back into the hug.

“No more bad,” whispered Eleven. “Just good.”

Fern stroked Eleven’s back and kissed the top of her head.

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“You know, your mom had hair just like yours. It was like touching down feathers,” said Fern as she pumped the spray bottle, misting up Eleven’s hair for her trim.



Eleven looked into the mirror to meet Fern's eyes.

"Do I look like her?"

"I think you might look more like your dad. I never met him, but seeing how beautiful you are, he must've been handsome."

Eleven smiled at Fern's compliment.

"It's not that you don't look like Anita," continued Fern, running a comb through Eleven's hair. "During lunch you blew on your soup, and I realised how much you resemble her." Fern laughed. "I'm such a weirdo."

"What happened, when I blew on my soup?"

"Well, you lowered your eyes, and the way your lashes fell on your cheeks... You looked exactly like her. Especially from where I'm standing, looking down." Fern paused as Eleven automatically attempted the action. "That's right, and from this angle? *Spitting image.*"

Fern could see Eleven peeking through the slits in her eyes to see how she looked like in the mirror. Fern laughed and told her she'll take a picture of Eleven someday to show her.

"Do you have her pictures?" asked Eleven.

"If I did, I'd have shown you already." Fern picked up the shears. "Try to keep still, baby. I don't want to chop off too much of your hair."

"Why did she die?"

Fern stopped, surprised by the lack of a segue. She'd always known she'd have to tell Eleven about Anita, but she hadn't imagined it would take place in a sunlit bathroom while trimming Eleven's hair. She'd always imagined it as sort of dark, and they'd be sitting face to face, holding each other's hands as Fern started her tale.

Fern guessed this worked as well.

“She was sick, your mother. Very sick.” Fern wondered if Eleven understood what drug addiction was, and decided to spare that talk for another time. “She was sick even before she got pregnant with you. After you were born, the illness caught up with her, and she died. You must’ve been only a couple of weeks old.”

“Was it drugs?”

Fern’s eyes widened. “Where did you...”

Eleven scrunched a cheek, shrugging.

Okay, so maybe they didn’t need to have the talk. (And what kind of poisonous conversations had Brenner exposed Eleven to?)

“Anita was a mess,” said Fern softly, shaking her head. “She kept saying she would stop taking the stuff, but she’d go back, again and again. It wasn’t just psychedelics; she was fond of anything that got her high.

“If not for the addiction, though, we’d never have met.” Fern gave a humourless laugh. “Life and its cruel tricks.”

Fern returned her gaze to Eleven; she had on a look of pity, and it suddenly occurred to Fern that what she’d just said might not have been appropriate for Eleven’s ears.

“Sorry, this is your mother we’re talking about—I shouldn’t have called her a mess. And I shouldn’t have spoken to you like you’re forty-seven and a friend. You didn’t need to hear that.”

Seconds passed in silence, then Eleven asked quietly:

“Did you like her?”

Fern blinked. “Of course I liked her.”

Eleven didn’t seem pleased with Fern’s answer.

“I mean, did you like her...” Eleven frowned, exhaling audibly, “... not like a friend?”

It was then Fern realised Eleven hadn't been unhappy with Fern's response; she'd been dissatisfied with the quality of her own question. Fern gaped at Eleven through the mirror, realising how profoundly simple Eleven's understanding of love was.

"Yes," said Fern, tears prickling her eyes, "I did."

\*\*\*

It was quite simple, when everything had been pared down and the relevant connections had been established. With a bit of assistance from some concerned people at The Pentagon who could keep secrets very well, Eleven would be legally adopted by Fern, and once the papers were processed they would book a flight for New York and spend a couple of weeks at the DARPA facility in Montauk, where scientists were currently refining Fern's formula, producing the serum, and testing it on mice. Eleven even had a tentative date scheduled for the procedure (somewhere around Easter), and there was a lot of prep work to do.

That day, they were picking out Eleven's new name.

"There are an infinite number of options, and to show you all of them would be unnecessary," Fern slid a list of names across the dining table, "so I made a shortlist according to meaning. They're all kind of strong-spirited."

Eleven scrutinised the piece of paper, moving her lips to enunciate the words.

Fern had discovered Eleven had a strong grounding in phonics and could read quite competently—not a complete surprise, considering how Brenner had employed her for gathering intelligence—she just didn't always know the meanings of words, but she had a wide enough vocabulary to understand their explanations.

Eleven spun the paper under her fingers, shrugging at Fern.

"I don't know," said Eleven, "they're all pretty."

Fern looked at the names, but none of them really jumped out at her.

She shifted in her seat, hearing something rustling in her pocket as she moved. Reaching into it she pulled out a receipt from the grocery store, and as she unfolded it, it all came back to her.

“A couple of days ago I was at the supermarket, the one near Chatham University? I helped a lovely girl find some wafers, and she happened to be an exchange student from France. Spoke excellent English. We had a little chat, and learnt each other’s names, and hers was so uncommon and exquisite that I had to ask what it meant—when she told me, I thought it could be an option for you, so I wrote it down in case I forgot.”

Fern smoothed out the wrinkles in the paper as best as she could. “What do you think of ‘Elodie’?”

Eleven looked interested now, studying the letters written on the back of the receipt.

“It means ‘borrowed riches’.” Fern gave a smile. “I like it because it reminds me of Anita, in a way. Like I’m forever borrowing you from her. Is that weird?”

Eleven shook her head. “You miss her,” said Eleven simply.

Once again, Fern marvelled at the depth of understanding Eleven had of complicated, non-positive feelings—something very rare for kids her age. It didn’t sound like a compliment, but to Fern, it was a beautiful thing. Eleven was capable, more often than not, of sympathising with sorrow rather than joy. This meant that while she often neglected the basic sentiments common within the social order (she didn’t see how initiating conversation by complimenting the weather elicited gratification in a person, for example), Eleven could be very perceptive when it came to things like regret, loss and commiseration.

“I do miss Anita,” said Fern softly, giving Eleven a smile. “So what do you think? Do you like ‘Elodie’?”

Eleven traced the letters with her finger.

“E-lo-die,” she voiced. Then she looked up. “Is ‘El’ short for ‘Elodie’?”

“I don’t see why it can’t be.”

Eleven nodded. She pointed to the name.

“This one,” she said, a note of finality in her voice.

Fern grinned. It was something small, but it was important to her that Eleven was taking charge and making choices. This was exactly the kind of participation Fern wanted Eleven to have in her own life. She’d spent her childhood acting according to the wishes of others; it was time she learnt to be her own person.

“Elodie Thayer,” said Fern in a congratulatory manner. “That’s your name, baby.”

“El Thayer,” said Eleven, lips curving.

“Yes, El Thayer.” Fern chuckled. “Can I call you El, too?”

“Yes.”

“How about ‘Elliebean’? Can I call you that?”

“...What is ‘Elliebean’?”

Fern burst out laughing. “*You’re* Elliebean. It’s like how I call you ‘baby’, but cuter.”

Eleven gave Fern a look that obviously meant she disagreed, but she didn’t say anything else, which made Fern laugh even harder.

El Thayer was going to be one great kid.

\*\*\*

It was Valentine’s Day, and they were in the living room making valentines for each other, and Fern said she wanted to make one for Dom as well, so did El want to make one for anybody else?

El paused as she heard this. Putting her glue stick and coloured paper down on the coffee table, she considered Fern’s question.

“Mom, after the—” El paused to recall the word, “—injection, will I forget this?” El was looking at the arts and crafts, but Fern knew she was talking about something bigger.

Recently they’d started talking—really talking—about what the effects of the serum were, and just the previous night Fern had explained how it would cause erosion in El’s experiences, making her quite different from how she was now. Fern knew it’d been on El’s mind since then, when she woke up with dark circles under her eyes and picked at her breakfast.

Fern put down her marker and reached out to tuck a wisp of hair behind El’s ear, feeling morose as she nodded a yes to El’s question.

“Will I,” El exhaled, a line appearing on her forehead. “forget you?”

“I believe you will.” Fern patted El’s cheek. “But I’ll be there when you wake up.”

Fern hadn’t wanted to unload the sombre reality of memory loss on El all at once; she’d started with educating El about the administration of the drug—it would hurt, having to be delivered into the spinal canal—but they wouldn’t actually be cutting into her at all, and El would still retain her personality and skills despite losing her supernatural abilities. What Fern hadn’t yet discussed in-depth with El was her post-surgery identity.

That would have to change today.

“Elliebean, you know how we talked about when you wake up, you won’t remember who you are, what you’ve done, or who you’ve met?”

“Yes.”

“This also means,” Fern ploughed on, “that from that day on, everything you know about yourself will have to come from me. I don’t want to just make up my own stuff. I need to know what I’m supposed to say. Would you tell me?”

Fern knew it was a lot to ask of a 12-year-old, but Fern trusted El’s understanding of things: she should be the one to make the decisions

that concerned her own future, especially since it was a future in which she would have forgotten the now.

El looked perplexed, and she absentmindedly twisted some strips of pink paper together as she thought.

“You don’t have to tell me everything now, but you need to understand that you even have the choice to know everything that has happened to you. This includes the bad stuff,” Fern grimaced, “like your time in the lab, for instance.”

“No,” said El, realisation stark upon her face, “not everything.”

Nodding, Fern gently took El’s wrist, the one with the tattoo on it.

“There are things you’d prefer to forget?”

“Yes.”

Fern brushed her thumb over the tattoo. “Let’s start with this. Do you want to forget this?”

“...Yes.”

“So if we remove it, it will leave a scar, right? What do I tell you about the scar?”

El’s eyes widened as she turned them on Fern. “You have to lie.” Then her expression gave way to a frown, and her chin puckered. “*I* have to lie. To me.” El said this with so much remorse that Fern had to blink several times as she tried hard not to cry.

“Think of them as stories, El. Not lies.”

El slumped against the back of the sofa, tossing the pink paper plait she’d woven onto the table. Fern could see she was trying to come to terms with the situation.

“This,” said El after several quiet moments, touching the mark on her left wrist. She took a deep breath. “I hurt my hand... in the kitchen.”

“Okay.” Fern realised this was something important, and she needed

to have a record of it. She grabbed a marker and made a note on a piece of paper. “Let me write this down so I don’t forget.”

It felt weird to put it down on paper. It was like they were writing, with all the best intentions in the world, the script for an elaborate farce.

“Could you - could you make the stories more...” El searched for the right expression, and Fern could guess what she was getting at.

“Detailed?”

“Yes. Detailed.”

“You’re okay with me doing that?”

“Yes.” El’s features relaxed. “I trust you, Mom.”

Fern nodded, understanding it was too large a responsibility for El alone to bear. El was going to be her *daughter*—while it didn’t feel right making up lies to pacify El’s future self, it was for her own protection, and Fern definitely advocated that. She’d share the burden with El with no complaints.

“There are a lot of other things—other stories—we need to talk about before your procedure,” said Fern gently, “but we don’t have to do them all today. I’ll ask you questions to help you, and if you have any thoughts, you just tell me. Okay?”

“Okay.”

Fern looked down at the paper she’d jotted the scar story down on, and an idea came to her.

“Should we record your current memories somewhere, maybe in a book or something, just in case?”

“No. If the bad men find it...” El shook her head. “It’s safer to forget.”

This troubled Fern, somehow. She knew El had some good memories—Chief Hopper and Joyce Byers had told her about the boys whom she’d befriended following her escape from the lab; and when Fern



had asked her how she'd found Eggos to be her favourite food, El had spoken, though not at length, about Mike, who'd basically fed, clothed and sheltered her. When prompted further, El had also named Dustin and Lucas, Mike's friends who in turn became hers.

Fern could tell El was fond of the boys, especially Mike; she was reluctant for El to give up the first positive memories of her life, especially when the ones she had prior were all quite dreadful.

"Isn't there anything you want to remember in particular?" Fern didn't like that she was posing a leading question, but she couldn't help it. She wanted Future El to remember what happiness was.

El frowned, shifting her eyes downwards, contemplating.

"No," she finally answered.

"You don't want to remember your friends?" said Fern, feeling dire.

"No."

Fern clenched her jaw, expelling air through her nose.

"Can I ask why?"

El raised her eyes to meet Fern's.

"Because," whispered El, "if I have to read about it, it's not real remembering."

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It took Fern by surprise when she picked up the phone two days their trip to Montauk, and found a distraught Joyce Byers on the other end of the line.

"Joyce? How did you—" Fern stopped. Joyce was friends with Chief Hopper. It wasn't strange that they could find a way to get a hold of Fern.

"I'm calling from a payphone. Is it - is it safe to talk to you?"

“I think so, yes,” said Fern, pulling the phone cord into the kitchen so she could keep an eye on El, who was at the range making omelettes for breakfast while watching the kettle. “Not many people know this number, and I think we’ve been vigilant enough covering our tracks to escape the government wiretapping.”

“Okay. That’s good.” Joyce emitted a quivering breath. “I need help, Fern. Will is very sick. It seems to be some sort of infection—I thought - I thought you might be the best person to ask about it.”

“What kind of infection?”

A pause followed, giving Fern some time to cover the mouthpiece and warn El not to forget the steam would come whistling out of the kettle spout. El rotated the kettle without even touching it, and Fern held her tongue.

Lately, El had been using her powers for the most mundane things. Fern guessed it was some form of separation anxiety, seeing how she was going to lose those abilities in a few weeks. While Fern was on tenterhooks every time El massacred a host of cells unnecessarily like that, she didn’t feel like putting a damper on El’s swan song.

This was good parenting, Fern told herself, and tried to believe it.

“When we found Will on the other side,” said Joyce, capturing Fern’s attention once more, “you know, the Upside Down—he had a - a long, snake-like thing in his throat.” Joyce’s voice faltered. “It was stuck in him like a root, and I pulled it out to get him breathing again. We recently found out he’s been coughing up things that look like that - that snake thing.”

Fern frowned.

“You’re saying Will brought back something from the nether?”

El snapped her head back to look at Fern.

“Yes. And he’s... seeing things.”

“What things?”

"I don't know, he says it looks a lot like the other world. It might be hallucinations, it might be something else, I don't know. Please, I don't know who else I should ask for help."

Fern took this to mean Joyce didn't want to sound crazy; and she understood completely.

"Joyce," said Fern firmly, "you helped me get my daughter. Of course I'll help."

"Oh, thank God. Thank you, Fern. Thank you so much. What should we do now? Should we drive to you? Do you need to look at him, or take some samples, or - or—"

The intensity of El's gaze told Fern she was tuning in to their phone call, and Fern frantically gestured to communicate that the omelette was getting burnt. El hurriedly switched off the fire and tried to save the eggs.

Fern's mind was racing. She had a really brilliant idea, but she didn't have the power to authorise it or see it through. Still, it wouldn't hurt to call up DARPA to ask. They might even be *interested* to see Will.

"Fern?"

"Sorry. I'm here, I was just thinking of something," answered Fern. "Let me make a call before I call you back, but do you think you and Will could make a trip to Montauk?"

"*Montauk*? Are you saying... Long Island?"

Fern could hear the doubt and incredulity in Joyce's voice. Perhaps it was the cost of the trip?

"That's where I'm taking El. Eleven, I mean. There's a facility there, we leave on Thursday. If they say yes, I'll cover the expenses, don't you worry—"

"God, Fern. No."

"I'm serious. You asked me for help, Joyce. Let me give it to you."

“A-All right, then. Thank you. I’ll find a way to pay you back, I promise.”

“We’ll talk about that later. Just wait for my call.”

“Okay. Thank you so, so much...”

Fern caught El’s eye. They exchanged grim nods.

Will Byers’s nightmare was lasting far too long.

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Working with DARPA—the military’s Advanced Research Projects Agency—wasn’t a walk in the park. Competition for funding was fierce and there was always the risk of projects getting scrapped, but Fern had somehow managed to spend the past 10 years in favour with the agency, mostly due to the efforts of the researchers on board with her plan. They’d affectionately dubbed it *Unscrew*; Fern had stubbornly refused to ask, but Matt Duffer had cheerfully informed her they knew what Brenner had started during Project MKUltra and how screwed up it was, and they were very pleased to help her undo it. Ross Duffer had then chimed in with how it would be like ‘developing a way-too-elaborate counterfactual, like writing fan-fiction for Brenner’s work’, and he’d actually sounded excited about it as he high-fived his brother.

Fern always suspected the Duffers were a bit mad. Frighteningly intelligent, but mad.

(That said, a place like DARPA... It was mad scientist central.)

The Duffer Brothers were more gestalt than twins, and they had the answers to everything. They were nearing their forties, sporting identical beards and identical voices; Matt had a background in biochem and Ross was primarily a theoretical physicist, but they knew and practiced science beyond those scopes. Fern had met them through Shawn Levy, neuro expert and the ex-colleague who’d witnessed her stealing Brenner’s research and had demanded to know why. It was a long story that had the most surprising ending, since Shawn had turned out to be some sort of undercover scientist at

Brenner's old lab and had been feeding information to some people high up in the Pentagon about how the CIA was endangering the interests of the Department of Defence through Project MKUltra, and how they were engaging in several unsanctioned activities that hinted at the development of a human weapon.

Basically, all of them had had the same goal: take down the CIA's mind-control programme by incriminating their research.

DARPA usually wasn't involved in stunts like these—they were very much the peaceful, science-loving geeks of the military—but someone in the Department of Defence must've been really fed up with the CIA's penchant of taking matters into their own hands, and decided to go around the CIA's backs to find out what the hell was going on. They figured they needed to fight fire with fire, and if the CIA had mad scientists, they'd pit DARPA's finest against them.

It was funny when Fern thought about it: the government was scared of their own, and this was a cover-up in itself. Had they been afraid that the tech would be leaked, and they wanted to destroy it before it got into the hands of their enemies? Or had they been afraid of the public outcry, when the people found out human experimentation had gone on right under their noses? This was the '80s, not World War II; people went up in arms about these things, especially if they involved children and pregnant mothers. Then there was the global reaction to care about.

No matter what the reality was, it worked for Fern: as long as she could protect Eleven, she didn't really care about the whys and the hows of the operation. They'd given her a part to play, and she had played it well. She'd been spy and scientist, given them what they wanted. Now it was their turn to fulfil their end of the deal—let Anita's baby live a normal life, without the threat of anyone coming after her just because she could *do things*.

There was only one blemish on the otherwise perfect plan: with the events that had recently unfolded in Hawkins, the government would be shooting themselves in the foot if they stepped in and waved around the evidence they'd gathered against Brenner. The people spearheading the DARPA mission had no jurisdiction to subjugate the CIA, and they were willing to bet whoever was behind the

experiments would drag DARPA down along with them. Now, DARPA had to take a step back and let the CIA perform their own cover-up, and in the meantime, work on what they had: the unsanctioned weapon itself.

The Duffers had explained that the government wanted to know exactly how Brenner had weaponised Eleven, how they could put her powers out of commission, and how the alternate dimension in Hawkins was connected to it all. It was the first step in exterminating the vestiges of the CIA's shady projects, and Fern knew it was the last step to take for Eleven to finally live in peace.

Fern knew that the Duffers were good people, but they were more tenacious genius than Samaritan. In a way, they shared that trait with Brenner: knowledge was enticement, which meant they were relentless when it came to uncovering truths and grasping the unknown. Thankfully, the difference lay in the means of their approach: while the Duffers weren't a hundred per cent altruistic, they were unyieldingly ethical when it came to working on humans; and that was enough, if not everything, to Fern.

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The 12-acre-large Montauk facility was a Modernist's wet dream with its patrolling messenger robots, bulletproof glass walls, and automated faucets in the bathrooms. In there, the 21st century had come early, but when the blinds were opened, it was easy to forget they weren't actually in a quiet seaside resort. The building's situation atop a hill afforded a spectacular view of the Atlantic waters, and the courtyard where the researchers took their breaks was host to a panoply of flowering trees and other April foliage—Fern thought the landscapers were doing a great job.

The Duffers were still trying to clear red tape for Joyce and Will, but they promised the team would look at Will, and Joyce was overjoyed when Fern relayed the information to her. Even though Fern knew that DARPA would see Will as merely another key to unlocking the grand mystery, it didn't change the fact that they were going to help him. It was win-win, no matter how Fern looked at it.

Fern and El were being accommodated in the hospital wing, sharing a room; El had experienced some nervousness about being in a lab environment, but the Duffers had expected this and gave her time to orient herself. They had the weirdest, most fantastic ideas to get El to open up—they decorated Eggos with her, brought her to their rec room (a glorified closet, really) to watch the first *Star Wars* movie on video cassette, started calling her their Princess Leia, and played *Life* with her after dinner ('because D&D would take until morning and Princess Leia has a bedtime').

A team of doctors, Shawn Levy included, were working with the Duffers; and when Fern wasn't dropping in on the Duffers' playtime with El, she was meeting with the doctors in the capacity of presiding pharmaceutical consult. She had been the one to devote years of her life working on the formula, after all; and she had done it all alone. She knew the drug inside out, and it also comforted her that she was so involved in the process. This was something that would actually invade her daughter's body, and she'd be damned if she didn't know exactly how the scientists at DARPA had modified it.

It was important that El knew all these people could be trusted. They would be interviewing El extensively, and though the documents they'd 'maybe kinda filched from the Hawkins lab database' (again, Duffer-speak) would supplement them, they still needed to know her current condition and state of mind.

Fern had been on the fence about knowing the truth about what Brenner had done to El while she was in his facility, and she casually asked Matt, after she'd learnt they had documents from the Hawkins database, if the information was classified.

Matt's expression shifted, and he immediately exchanged an unreadable look with Ross.

"You have clearance, but I don't think it's something you'd be better off knowing," he said.

Fern steeled herself and asked to see the files anyway. Matt gave her the password, squeezed her shoulder, and the brothers left her alone with the computer.

It was like walking through a nightmare—Fern read about the torture Eleven had been through: sleep deprivation, sensory deprivation, and imprisonment in what looked like soundproof time-out room. She found out how Brenner often chose to play the good guy, swooping in to save Eleven in times of choreographed trouble, just to win her trust. She saw pictures of Eleven's old room and how she'd been denied basic privacy, with surveillance cameras mounted in high corners. She went white with fury after digging further into history and seeing a report of Eleven's first non-benign use of her abilities: she'd been seven and Brenner had been staging one of his *Papa-is-a-good-man* shows, and an orderly had been given free rein, so he ran his hand up the inside of her thighs. She fractured the orderly's fingers and threw him against the wall before Brenner could come in and 'save' her.

Eleven hadn't been able to hurt anything or anyone for years after that. Fern thought her heart was going to fail her when she realised that must've been the consequence of a massive, mind-numbing guilt, something a child shouldn't even have been subjected to. The fact that it rose due to a violation of modesty further incensed Fern.

Brenner continued keeping Eleven in a highly stressful environment in hope she would display such tendencies again someday, and his wish was granted when she basically murdered two orderlies in cold blood when they tried to lock her in the time-out room. She'd become a lot stronger, a lot more decisive—a lot more weapon-like. She'd learnt not to care about guilt.

Fern felt nauseated as she turned her eyes away from the offensive document blinking on the screen. She couldn't believe that all this had been preserved in writing as some sick form of scientific evidence. She couldn't believe she'd spent all that time in Hawkins with all that abuse taking place right across town.

Fern had thought herself clever for biding her time, for fool-proofing the plan; this belief was bolstered when Terry—poor, poor Terry—had tried to bring Brenner down. If only Terry had waited, Fern had always thought, if only Terry had listened to her, she wouldn't have failed so miserably.

But now, Fern was saturated with regret. No amount of if-onlys or



penance could make up for the years El had lost in that facility and the horrors she'd been put through. The only thing that Fern could do was to make sure she didn't fail El again. It was El's wish to see the procedure through, and Fern would try her utmost to make the process as bearable as she could. She owed El that, and everything more.

### Notes for the Chapter:

1. SURPRISE! I gave the Duffers and Shawn Levy major parts to play in this fic. All these crossovers, just giving me the chills. I had so much fun imagining the Duffers. I adore and respect them so much. I hope it's not weird they're characters in here, lol. Also, I think it's their birthday? Paying tribute the proper way, yo.

2. I saw on tumblr the other day that this fandom needs some mother-daughter relationship fics? I didn't comment but I wanted to say "I'M WRITING ONE NOW." Lol. The mother-daughter theme has been an integral part of the story right from the day it was conceptualised, so I hope this fic falls into the hands of whoever likes that genre.

3. I really rediscovered Eleven in this chapter. She's a great character, really sensitive and understanding and far more emotionally intelligent than we give her credit for. Also, I got the *Eleven reads!* bit from Millie, who mentioned that in a scene that had been cut, Eleven read Nancy's diary. Eleven was also able to read Will's 'Castle Byers' sign, and Brenner had mentioned that he'd read nursery rhymes to her and she'd read back, so he must've given her some sort of education while she was in the lab. Thank you, canon, for these details.

4. I'm no expert on DARPA, but I've been researching them ever since I decided to involve them in this fic, and the more I learn the more I think they're a fit! They report directly to the Department of Defence,

they're a bunch of really smart scientists all in one place, and they just seem less shady than the CIA lol idk.

5. I've never set foot in the U.S., much less Montauk, but I went on Google Maps and found this place called Montauk Manor? It's a resort hotel built on a hill, and I loved the idea of the facility being at that location because it was so pretty and huge and idk.

6. And Montauk! I was thinking how fics are basically homages to the original, and I really appreciate what the creators have given us, so I wanted to sort of realise the Duffers' unfulfilled dream of setting the story in Montauk. It's not the original cast or the original mystery, but I hope this makes them happy if they ever discover this story. Hahaha.

7. So many more mysteries to be uncovered! Relationships to be revealed! Wheeeeeee!

## 12. Mike - One day it's fine and next it's black

### Notes for the Chapter:

One cultural thingy:

In Japan, the usual first reaction to receiving a gift is to sort of try and give it back? Haha. I don't know if this happens in your culture, dear readers, but it's real, and I made El behave very Japanese-ly when she got the gift.

One reference thingy:

Oh yessss. The title of this chapter is totally a reference to *Should I stay or should I go* by The Clash.

One weather thingy:

I actually went to Google Tokyo weather on March 5, 1998, and it was raining. I'm a stickler for such things, so I shit you not, they really needed umbrellas. Yay realism and spring rain.

### Mike

If she was really Eleven, and he was in love with her, it meant he just wanted the *nice* bits of her—the El bits, the ones that were wholesome and good and unperturbed. He'd even admitted it to himself, hadn't he? That day they'd had breakfast together. He'd liked that El was an adaptation of Eleven. He'd liked that they looked alike, but weren't really the same.

But were they really not the same?

It'd been confusing when he'd believed that they were two different people, but now it was worse. God. It wasn't possible, was it? How did things suddenly get so complicated? *How?*

And just that afternoon Mike had been thinking how El seemed to be a happier version of Eleven. Damn, all these thoughts, just coming back to haunt him... And if El was really Eleven, she *deserved* to be happy. She'd been through enough shit. And if Mike was the one to

drop the proverbial brick, what would that make him?

It'd be one of the few times when it'd make perfect sense to shoot the messenger, that's what.

Seriously, though. Would he really like it if El *was* Eleven? He was pretty sure *she* wouldn't like to know she'd been raised in a facility. Also, what was up with that whole thing about foster care? And why did it seem so suspiciously congruent with the original story? Had she lost her powers? And brain surgery, god, *seriously*?

And how the fuck had they ended up meeting in *Japan*? Was it some kind of cosmic arrangement, or was it just fate playing them? Why were there so many questions and absolutely no answers?

And, Mike remembered, there was also the thing with Will.

Mike hadn't searched for Eleven because Will had insisted, tearfully and angrily and all those years back, that their inability to shut up about her was putting him through something horrific he didn't want to relive. He'd said that he 'couldn't hear her anymore', which shocked them all. He'd said they had to give up on her, because all the Upside Down offered was radio silence. He'd said Eleven was gone.

And Mike had believed him, because Will was his friend, and friends don't lie.

For a long time he'd been jealous that Will was the one who got to share a connection with Eleven, not him. But it also comforted Mike that there was a connection *to be had*; 'gone' didn't mean 'dead', and in his youth, Mike had always clung on to the hope that one day Will would phone him up and tell him that he'd established contact with Eleven once again.

That never happened, but now, here Mike was; an ocean apart from where he'd met Eleven, having someone who looked exactly like her—who could actually even *be* her—waltz right into his life.

It wasn't implausible that 15 years ago some kind, well-connected soul found Eleven, took her in, made her forget (that was where the

brain surgery figured in, probably) and gave her a new identity, and all this led to the connection with Will getting cut—and there was probably a good reason for all of that. Telling her who she was (if she was who he thought she was) would make it all real for her *and* for Mike (though mostly for her).

Mike really didn't want to be the one to rob her of her happiness. If El-slash-maybe-Eleven found out about her past, she wouldn't just be El Thayer, the smart, funny girl from Pittsburgh who could speak fluent Japanese—she'd also be the girl who grew up in a facility, living through a tortured childhood, with the ability to kill a team of federal agents with her mind.

But then she'd also be the girl who'd braved terrors to find his best friend; the girl who'd saved him from breaking his bones on a surface of water; the girl who trusted him with her whole being; the girl who loved him enough to sacrifice her life for his.

Mike dumped his head in his hands and fisted tufts of his hair, not caring he was on a train and people were already kind of wary of him for looking non-homogeneous. The passengers on either side of him, alarmed by his behaviour, moved a seat further down the row.

If he was truly wishing for El and Eleven to be the same person just so he could love her, he was being very selfish.

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“Wow, Mike. You look like...”

“Shit, I know,” Mike finished El's sentence as he opened the door wider to let her in. He'd been up all night thinking, and there had been no conclusions.

“How're you feeling?” asked Mike.

“Fantastic,” answered El coolly.

El had come up to his room to help carry the presentation materials; they were then going to leave them at Red Entertainment after the pitch for further perusal.

There were three hardcover binders they had to lug over, so they were going by taxi even though it was just a nine-minute walk. Mike carried two of the folders, groaning as he shouldered the tote bag that held them; El ribbed him, boasting about how she'd hauled all three over to the hotel by herself, and she'd even taken the train that day.

Seeing El like this—so *normal*, so perfectly untouched by calamity—made Mike steel his resolve for what had to be the thousandth time: he was not going to tell El about Eleven. He would leave that evening for the airport, say a goodbye, probably hug her longer than was appropriate, and never see her again. He wouldn't even engage GoWise's services the next time he was in Japan.

It was for his sake and hers; and it was for the best.

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"Thank you very much," said Hiroi in English, shaking Mike's hand. Mike smiled at him. He liked Hiroi; it'd been wonderful meeting him and his team.

"I'm looking forward to working with you," said Mike, and by his side, El translated. "Thank you for accepting our proposal."

Hiroi clapped him on the back, saying something back, and El said:

"He thanks you for accepting theirs as well."

Hiroi turned to Amano and Fujii, who approached and handed a gift bag with a flower motif to Mike. El received one too, and she seemed very surprised as she let out a rapid articulation of Japanese, shaking her head and trying to return it, but Amano gently pushed the bag back towards her. El turned to Mike and said:

"They got you a parting gift, and they gave me one too. I'm really just here to service you, they shouldn't have."

"Lovely people," said Mike, reaching out to shake all of their hands, and Hiroi laughed, understanding the words.

They said their goodbyes, leaving the building, stepping out into the rain with their umbrellas; as they made their way back to Mike's hotel, an unusual silence hung between them. Mike attributed it to the distance; they couldn't exactly walk shoulder-to-shoulder while carrying umbrellas. It was awkward not to chat, however; they should've been celebrating or something, since Red was keen to partner up with Mike. No contracts had been signed—it was still too early for that—but they had an agreement for one to be drafted.

"Thanks," said Mike after a while, "for everything you've done these couple of days. If not for you, this wouldn't have gone so smoothly."

"Mike," said El patiently, "it's my job." She paused. "But thank you for being appreciative. You are most, most welcome."

They lapsed into silence once more. Mike couldn't help but think how distant El was being. He badly wanted to ask why she was acting, for lack of a better word, strange, but he was already unsettled enough around her with all the unspoken confessions. He knew if he spoke he'd sound like a fool.

Mike checked his watch. There were three more hours before he had to head for the airport. El would be taking him there, but according to the schedule, between now and seven was El's time off.

His heart sank as he realised what this meant—these were the last few moments he'd ever spend with El if he stood by his promise to himself: to keep mum about Eleven and avoid El for the rest of his life.

But what if they were really two different people?

*QUIT IT*, Mike roared silently at himself.

It was better to not say anything. Better to give it the benefit of the doubt.

Mike stopped when he realised El wasn't walking with him. He turned and tilted his umbrella to see her a few steps behind, unmoving.

"El?" Mike couldn't see her face; it was hidden under her umbrella.

“You all right? Does your head hurt?”

“No...”

Mike was worried; it was cold and rainy, a far cry from the weather of the past few days, and Mike had read somewhere that changes in temperature and air pressure could cause headaches. El needed to get indoors as soon as possible.

"The hotel is just up front—"

"Mike," interrupted El, coming close enough for their umbrellas to bump, "we need to talk."

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Mike filled the electric kettle with water before settling it down on the base. He flicked the switch to set it to boil, then started taking stock of the selection of teabags and instant coffees on the tray—and feeling illiterate because half the flavours were written in Japanese.

"Would you like me to choose, or would you like to read off the packet and know exactly what you're going to have?" asked Mike, hoping a joke would help alleviate his nervousness.

El gave a dry smile and looked at the tray. "The brown wrapper—roasted green tea; the green, regular green tea; and the coffee in the blue packaging has both milk and sugar. I'll take the roasted green tea. Thanks."

Mike chose a black coffee—it said *BLACK COFFEE* on the packet, he had no doubt what it was—and tipped its contents into a porcelain cup. He then lowered El's teabag into another cup.

He hoped his procrastination wasn't obvious; he didn't know which he was trying harder to delay—talking about whatever it was El wanted to talk about, or saying goodbye to her forever.

"Water isn't boiled yet," said Mike with a weak smile, seating himself on the bed to face El. He half-expected her to say something like 'I can see that', but she didn't. She just gave him a crooked twitch of



her lips that wasn't exactly a smile.

Maybe she was nervous too.

"Mike," said El, shifting forwards in her chair, "would you tell me about the girl who looks like me?"

Mike's heart skipped a beat, and suddenly his tongue was sandpaper.

There was so much he wanted to tell El, but it was everything he felt he couldn't say. And there was nothing else left to say if he couldn't answer her.

"You're going back tonight," said El quietly, "and I need to know."

Mike closed his eyes. She'd figured something out. He should've guessed she would; El was incredibly sharp. Eleven had been, too. Damn, he'd asked too many questions in the cab the previous night.

Mike steepled his fingers and pressed them against his forehead.

"You're not her," he said flatly.

"You don't know that."

"El. Please."

"No," said El, voice grating, "you don't get to deny me this. Not you. The way you looked at me the first day we met—I haven't forgotten. She meant something to you."

Mike had nothing to say to that. He avoided looking at her, choosing to bore his gaze into the carpet under his feet. The bubbling of the water in the electric kettle was the only thing that filled the silence.

There was a pop from the switch not long after, signalling that the hot water was ready. Neither of them got up to make their drinks.

"Mike."

Mike closed his eyes again, not wanting to face El.

"Mike," said El again, more imploringly this time.

Mike took a deep breath before he finally looked up. “Are you happy, El?”

“What?”

“Are you happy?” repeated Mike. He made a sweeping gesture. “Now. Here. Your life. Are you happy?”

El frowned. “I... Well, yes, but—”

“Then you don’t need to know about her,” Mike finished, feeling like his heart was about to break, because it hurt; it hurt so much to not tell El how he felt about Eleven.

El shook her head, stood up, and paced. “Mike, you don’t understand,” El splayed her hands against the air, “I really need to know. It’s... important to me.”

She came to face Mike squarely.

“The girl who looks like me—she’s the one, right? The girl you liked when you were twelve.”

Mike stopped breathing. She’d figured that out as well.

El’s hands were fisted by her side; her brow was furrowed; and her chest heaved as she looked straight at Mike.

“I want to know, because,” El paused to swallow, like she was trying to muster up the nerve to carry on speaking, “I think I might want you in my life from now on, and if you go home tonight leaving this hanging, it’ll be all weird, and I have a feeling we’ll never speak to each other again.”

Mike blinked, stunned. He hadn’t expected that. He’d thought El had wanted to know because people who lost their memories were obsessed with finding out their pasts. Were they not, or was he just overly-influenced by fiction?

And had El said what he thought she’d just said? She wanted him in her life? What did that mean?

“So you - you...” stammered Mike, unable to finish his sentence because it was going to end in *you like me?*, which sounded presumptuous, and what if he’d misunderstood? There wasn’t a hole in his hotel room for him to crawl into.

“I really want to know what you know,” said El, coming to sit by him on the bed. “Friends tell each other things, remember?” Her eyes were dark and earnest as she peered into his face.

Mike gave an almighty sigh and rubbed his face vigorously with his palm. El was right. Above everything, they were friends. It kind of killed the frisson that had come with the assumption that El actually liked him more than a friend, but Mike didn’t want to discount any of the platonic feelings El had for him. She’d made it very plain that Mike was important to her, and that was enough.

“Fine,” Mike summoned all the fortitude he had, “I’ll tell you, and I’ll tell you *everything*, because friends don’t lie.”

El’s eyes turned round, and her face brightened considerably.

“But,” Mike hesitated, “first you have to promise me a few things.”

“Sure,” said El breathlessly, nodding.

Mike twisted himself to face her, apprehension trying to dissuade him, El’s pleading look winning him over.

“One: promise that you will believe me, because a lot of this is going to sound really, really crazy.”

El opened her mouth to say something, but Mike gave her a stern look, and she held up her hands in surrender before nodding.

“Next. I need you to promise that after you hear about her, you won’t lose your innocence, your hope, and every good thing you’ve built up for yourself since you woke up from surgery.”

“My *innocen*—” El cut herself off, her gaze turning severe. “Why, Mike? Was it really that bad?”

Mike realised El thought he was going to tell her about her time in

foster care. He sighed. If only it were that simple.

“Promise first,” said Mike.

Drawing her brows together, El nodded.

“I promise.”

Mike felt wistful as a certain memory surfaced in his mind. All these parallels, these damned emotions revisited. He knew El had to be feeling pretty freaked out, but there was no other way to set up the conversation.

Impulsively, Mike put his hand on El’s shoulder and met her eyes.

“El, listen. If this is really your past, and these really are your truths, I have the responsibility, as messenger, to bear all of it with you. You won’t be alone; I’ll be here, and we’ll figure things out together.”

El’s expression softened, and she managed the slightest of smiles. “Promise?”

Mike nodded. “Promise.”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

...And we conclude tonight's flurry of posts! I'm going to be posting like this from now on—El-Fern-Mike—so please hang in there until the next update. As you can see, it's super long and super plot-heavy, and these things really don't write themselves, so.

And it's International Fanworks Day! I'm glad I posted today; I feel like I've contributed to Ao3, somehow. Haha. \*self-pat on back\*

Also I apologise that Mike took over 2000 words of struggling to find the guts to tell El the truth. There's no denying that Eleven was violent and harmful in her approaches to defend others, and I think adult! Mike would be very, very conscious of that by virtue of the fact that he's thought about Eleven for so long.

He's probably analysed all her behaviours to death. I wanted to give Mike some credit; he's a wonderful human being with a beautiful heart, there's no reason why he'd overlook that. Even though he loves Eleven very much, he probably wouldn't condone that kind of violence, not normally. No victim of bullying would, I think. Plus, even when he was 12 he got angry at Eleven for hurting Lucas, so I think he'd be extra careful and feel very torn about telling El Thayer how Eleven handled her enemies.

Lastly: Happy Birthday, Duffer Brothers! You've challenged my creativity so much. I'm so glad you guys are in this industry. <3

### 13. El - As she listened

El

Corresponding to the tattoo she'd had on her left wrist, the girl's name was Eleven—El for short (what were the odds?)—and she'd been locked up and experimented on in a laboratory, probably since she'd been a baby. Mike and his friends (Lucas, the guy living in Hawaii; and NASA engineer Dustin) had found her by accident on a rainy night while out searching for their missing friend Will (the microbiologist), who'd been transported to a dimension ('the Upside Down') that was a dank, slimy parallel of their own world, forever cloaked in night, and home to a monster called the Demogorgon.

As she listened, El didn't know whether to be impressed at Mike's storytelling prowess (he'd actually said the words 'forever cloaked in night' *out loud*—like a true Dungeon Master), or disturbed that this seemed to be the actual story.

When Mike got to the part where Eleven had telekinesis strong enough to suspend him in mid-air after he'd attempted jumping off a cliff (to save the NASA engineer, who'd been held at knife-point by a mouth-breather named Troy), El had to interrupt him to scrutinise his expression. Mike seemed perfectly serious, though El harboured a wild hope of him stopping his story to yell *Gotcha!* at some point. She'd then be charmingly offended and he'd try to make her laugh while apologising, and they'd finally move on to the story where she was raised in the foster home from hell.

"I *told* you a lot of this was going to sound crazy," said Mike after several moments of silence.

El chewed on the insides of her cheeks. She recalled the meeting from two days back, where she'd translated the backstory of that game character, and how Mike had been so perturbed by it.

He really wasn't kidding about this numerically-named kid with superpowers.

El took a deep breath, and gestured for him to continue.

She struggled to keep up as Mike introduced even more characters: his elder sister, her best friend Barb (who'd also gone missing), Will's brother, Will's mother (basically Will's entire family), Hawkins's Chief of Police, and their science teacher Mr. Clarke; they'd all contributed to the effort of constructing a sensory deprivation tank for Eleven in the middle of their school gym so she could locate Will via astral projection. El failed to keep the wryness out of her face as she took in all of this, yet Mike ploughed bravely on.

When Mike's eloquence broke down and he started bumbling about how Eleven made a bunch of government-agents-gone-bad bleed out of their orifices—and how nobody would've blamed her in that situation, they'd had guns pointed at 12-year-old Mike and his equally 12-year-old friends and Eleven was just trying to protect them—El finally understood why Mike seemed to have reservations about being entirely truthful to her about Eleven.

He hadn't wanted El to think she might've been a cold-blooded killer child.

Well, it was a little too late for that.

Eleven's killing attracted the Demogorgon, who was a fan of blood, and it came after Mike, Lucas and Dustin, who were in a classroom with a very fragile, possibly-dying Eleven. Just before the monster attacked, Eleven mustered all of her strength, pinned it to the blackboard, and used her powers to conquer it.

Mike threw the back of his hand across his eyes, stopping mid-sentence.

"Hey, whoa, you okay?" asked El, alarmed; Mike had crimped his lips, and his chin trembled.

"Yeah, sorry, I've never - I've never said all this out loud before. Didn't think I would get so emotional," said Mike pathetically as he tried to laugh.

El patted his knee awkwardly before crawling past him to grab a handful of tissues off the bedside table. She felt guilty for making him relive all this, then tried to squash the feeling by thinking it might be

healthier that Mike was confiding in someone, then felt guilty all over again because her reasoning stemmed from a perverse need for self-justification.

“Thanks.” Mile took the tissues and wiped his nose. “This is really embarrassing. God.”

“No, it’s not.” El shrugged. Mike took this as his cue to go on.

“She disappeared after that,” said Mike, still sniffing a little, “into thin air, with the monster, and I never saw her again. Until...”

He looked at El, the corners of his mouth wilting.

El sighed, a weighty one that bore down on both her and Mike. She’d promised Mike she’d believe him, yes, but it was all so... *absurd*. And horrific.

“Listen,” El touched Mike’s knee again, “I have no doubt you’re not making any of this up. But I’m still having trouble accepting all of it to be true.”

“I understand; it’s like me and religion,” agreed Mike.

“And I can’t help but reject the idea that I would be capable of killing anybody, you know?” El shook her head, snorting. “I mean, if Eleven was really me. I took a self-defence class in college and learned the hard way I was only good for *running away* from my attacker, not defeating them.”

“I hear you, though Eleven wasn’t really a fan of the fisticuffs,” said Mike before he stilled, contemplating.

“El, I know it might bother you that she actually caused the deaths of several people, and I’m not saying I condone killing—but you have to remember Eleven was *conditioned* to be who she was. Or, in a manner of speaking, *what* she was. There was this psycho guy she called ‘Papa’, a scientist who controlled her since she was born or something, and *he* made her into a weapon. Yes, she got out of dangerous situations with violence, but she never intentionally hurt the innocent. She was a good, loving person, and I’m not saying that because I’m blinded by love or protective of her memory or anything



like that. That was what she was, and though we were just kids back then, I knew it, and my friends knew it.”

El knew Mike was trying to make her feel better; and it was working, even if just a little.

Honestly, El wasn’t entirely closed off to the idea of accepting all this as her past—she just found it difficult because of the deep-seated, human perception of seeing-is-believing, the specious little voice in people’s heads that made them refuse to hope or promise or trust; El had spent her entire life fighting that voice, and she usually won. She’d purposely placed herself in uncomfortable situations just to see if she could surmount her misgivings and *grow*—it was how she mastered one of the hardest languages in the world; it was why she was so good at her job; it was why she ended up not blacklisting Mike after the first time she’d met him.

She had to give this ridiculous story a chance.

“What happened to you after that?” asked El.

Mike’s eyes drifted as he remembered. “Well, there was a huge furore the next day because there was damage to the middle school building; people were dead; Will’s death was faked; children were involved; the lab’s workings got exposed, kinda, they did block the investigations eventually... Everyone in Hawkins was feeling insecure. My parents—my mom, especially—were very upset at first, and Mom wanted to sue a bunch of people: like the Chief of Police, who was probably the one who told the agents Eleven was at the middle school, effectively putting us kids in danger, but the Chief himself managed to talk my mom out of suing him because I was so involved with Eleven. Said that it’d invite trouble, and we do not want to get in trouble with the government.”

“Shit got real, huh?”

“Shit got real,” nodded Mike, “but he was right. I get it now, now that I’m older—it was either Will or Eleven, that night. Will was up against the Demogorgon; Eleven, the guys from the lab. And with her powers, Eleven’s chances of survival were a lot higher than Will’s.”

El hugged her elbows close to herself, wondering why these kids had been put through so much so young.

“So did it all end there?” asked El hopefully.

Mike gave a crooked smile. “Somewhat. It was bad at school, too. That mouth-breather Troy? He sauntered back into school, asshole incarnate, and started spreading all these awful rumours about Eleven and us. And believe it or not, some people bought into it, especially those who’d heard of her—she’d been sighted at a supermarket in the neighbourhood. The gossipmongers got the rest going.”

“You haven’t really mentioned it, but I have a feeling Hawkins is small town.”

“In those days? More like ‘tiny village’. Everyone knew everyone else, for better or worse.” Mike gave a sorry kind of smirk. “Anyway, when Troy called Eleven something he really shouldn’t have, I just lost it. I’m not proud of it, but I managed to land him into major trouble by hurting myself and saying he did it. Everyone believed me because Troy had a reputation and I was a fantastic actor, plus I was a lot smarter than him and could weave seamless lies.”

“You do tell a good story,” said El agreeably.

“If Troy ended up in juvie or something, though, it would’ve been on me. Thankfully, things got settled without too much drama—I think it was mainly due to Chief Hopper making his rounds and giving Troy’s family the same speech he gave my mom: don’t talk about anything related to the incident if you want to stay safe in Hawkins. Still, it got put on Troy’s record, and he never bothered me or my friends again. We had a really happy Christmas.”

El chuckled and shook her head. “You went a little nuts there, huh?”

Mike shrugged. “It was El, I would’ve done anything for her.” Mike blinked. “I mean, *that* El. Not that I wouldn’t do anything for—” Mike caught himself in time and shut his mouth, ears reddening. “Anyway, where was I?”

"You missed Eleven enough to give hell to a wicked boy who wronged her name," said El, gesticulating, trying to emulate Mike's dramatic flair.

"Nice try," complimented Mike with a laugh. "But I wasn't the only one who missed her. You know, I think I only got so upset with Troy because I thought defaming the dead was just unforgivable; I mean, I hoped she was alive, but the evidence was against me. She'd been very weak, and she said 'goodbye, Mike' before she destroyed the Demogorgon so naturally I thought she'd gone down with it, you know?"

"But one day during spring break, Dustin, Lucas and I were just hanging out, talking about how bummed we were about Will not being around because he suddenly had to go out of town with his mom; and we were joking about how at least this time we know he's not in the Upside Down when Dustin suddenly shot up to his feet and went: 'Oh my god what if Eleven is in the Upside Down?' God, that was the first time I realised I didn't have to be lonely missing her—Dustin and Lucas missed her too. We just sort of spent the whole of spring break convincing ourselves she wasn't dead and had instead been sucked into the nether; theorising the hows and whys; trying to figure out how we could get ourselves into the Upside Down to look for her and get back out safely."

"And did you?"

"Almost, actually—we formed an elaborate plan for getting ourselves into the lab through a pipe—but the guys wanted to wait for Will to come back because he was the most knowledgeable about the Upside Down. To be honest, I really wanted to ask Nancy instead of Will, since technically she was the first one out of our party who'd been in there without getting trapped, but she was busy gathering evidence to take down the lab or something; you know, justice for Barb. It was all very grownup and very secret, I couldn't relate to it, and I didn't want to take her mind off of it. And maybe a part of me was jealous that she was doing something for her dead friend and I... wasn't."

"...You know, this could be a plot for a movie."

"Oh, El. A movie wouldn't cover it. It'd have to be eight hours long or

something.”

El laughed. “Okay, so what happened next?”

“We were all ready to implement our plan; all we needed was Will’s input. We didn’t count on him coming with us—Will hadn’t met Eleven in person, so we understood how he wouldn’t have been as emotionally attached to her as we were.” Mike shook his head, and there was little humour in his laugh. “We were so naive back then, thinking Will would be with us on the plan.

“In our defence, it wasn’t mere assumption. After Will came back from the Upside Down, he was quite vocal about how he spent his time there. Right from the moment he woke up, in fact. He told us about the close shaves, where he hid, stuff like that. But as time passed he talked less and less about it, and the rest of us—especially me, because I had that thing with Troy—didn’t pick it up because we were so absorbed in the aftermath of our own experiences.”

“Let me guess: Will didn’t take too well to the idea.”

“Not at all. In fact, he had a shocking story of his own to tell.” Mike’s brow creased as he met El’s inquisitive gaze. “He came back from that trip with his mom, and of course we were all ‘Will, Will, we have this plan to look for Eleven please help us’, but Will was *furious* when he heard about it.

“Now, the thing about Will is, he’s this—and I mean this in the best possible way—*herbivore*, always gentle and mild, and the best person in the room, genuinely. That’s why we were... fucking *stunned*, when he exploded, right there in the basement of my home, thumping his fists on the table we used to play D&D on and shouting that we were completely oblivious to how the other dimension had scarred him, and how talking about Eleven was resurrecting all these horrific memories of his time there.

“It got stranger when he dropped another bomb on us: apparently, he’d been able to sense Eleven all along.”

“Whoa, what?”

“*Yeah.* He and Eleven had a connection of some sort—though now, thinking about it, I’m starting to realise the connection was more between Will and the Upside Down than Will and Eleven—and Will had apparently been able to hear her for months, because she’d been, as Dustin had very cleverly surmised, in the Upside Down.”

“Wasn’t Dustin also the one who figured out how the compasses pointed to the gate?”

“That’s the one.”

“Dustin has a beautiful mind.”

“I’ll tell him you said that.”

“Please.”

“So Will was there, yelling and crying about how we should just wake up, get on with our lives, and stop wasting our time because Eleven had left. He said he couldn’t sense her anymore—the Upside Down was empty or something, and he *knew* she was gone—and if we were his friends, we would stop bringing it all up.”

“Wow. Very dramatic.”

“Very. And very unlike Will, which was scary for us. He was so adamant that we forget about her, so for a while he was pretty suspicious of us, always making sure we weren’t going off on a search or something. Lucas called him out on it eventually—making me realise how Lucas’s bluntness was more gift than irritating personality trait—and Will lightened up after that, went back to normal. We all made it through middle school still best friends, but Eleven and the Upside Down became such a touchy subject, we never really spoke about it again.”

“Not at all?”

“Well, Dustin and Lucas and I would have these awkward silences where we knew we wanted to talk about it, but it felt like we were doing something behind Will’s back if we actually did. On occasion they’d try to use humour, hoping to broach the subject by saying something like ‘that’s because Mike’s still hung up on Eleven’

whenever I refused to go out with girls who liked me—and I'd just laugh it off, but that was the closest we ever came to it, especially since Will would sorta flinch whenever he was in earshot of those jibes."

"Will's protective."

"I guess you can say that."

A thought came to El. "Mike, we're talking about Eleven like she's another person," El allowed worry to creep into her voice, "but assuming that she's really me—how do I fit into all of this?"

Mike and El stared at each other.

"Your entire childhood is a blank," said Mike slowly, "so that part of the story fits; and if we match things up with Will's claim about you being in the Upside Down, you must have defeated the monster, went into its world, then gotten out at some point. After that, maybe you were taken into custody of someone powerful—since I bet if anyone knew you were still alive they'd want to take advantage of your powers, so it had to be someone with the authority to cover things up—and then had something done to your brain to erase your powers and memory; and finally you became El Thayer."

To the rational part of El's mind, Mike's hypothesis sounded far-fetched—but after everything he'd been saying for the past hour and a half, El was starting to think it relatively normal.

"Yes," El mused, "but who would've been behind it? It's quite the orchestration."

"I dunno, your mom?"

El burst out laughing as the image sprang into her mind; it was too preposterous. "My *mom*? Mike, my mom runs a gardening website and sells Tupperware on the side. And, she has really bad knees. How on earth would she be powerful enough to stage something like that?"

"Well, has she ever been a part of the federal government? Maybe she was the only compassionate person in the CIA or something."

“Excuse me while I laugh.”

“I’m only half-joking. No—I’m quarter-joking.” Mike snapped his fingers. “Have you ever asked her what she did during her time in Hawkins?”

El quieted down, but didn’t give up her grin. “She owned a landscaping business there, Mike. Very normal stuff.”

“Okay—what about your uncle?”

“Uncle Dom?”

“Yeah, he lived in Hawkins too, right?”

El tried to remember, but nothing came through. “You know, come to think of it—I don’t know what Uncle Dom used to do in Hawkins.”

Mike had on an *aha-you-see-now-don’t-you* look. “Maybe Uncle Dom was the person behind the plan!”

El rolled her eyes. “Mike, I doubt Uncle Dom is a—”

The pain washed everything in a blinding white light, and El immediately regretted rolling her eyes like that because that had to be it, that had to be the trigger, only this time there hadn’t been any warning, any throbbing, it was just straight-up pain...

Mike sounded faint and faraway, and El knew he was calling her name, but she couldn’t seem to focus on him long enough to acknowledge his presence, it was almost as if he was fading into the distance...

Then everything went dark, and El was looking into a room, illuminated by a solitary lightbulb.

The room looked like a replica of the shed El herself was in, except El’s was covered in tendrils of shiny black moss. El put her hand against the wall separating the two places. It felt like nothing, and yet there was something.

On the other side of that nothing-something wall was a little boy. The

boy was as big as she was. He was fumbling with a weapon—a long gun—struggling with it, trying to load it.

*Will.*

El jumped when she heard a sinister purring—it was the wrinkled, hairless man, coming into a hulking existence from somewhere she couldn't see, and she backed away instinctively, whimpering. She was afraid of him, but she also felt indebted to him—he'd taken her here, away from the Bad Place. He hadn't hurt her at all.

He'd kept her safe.

Yet a part of her hated him, and it was different from the kind of hate that she knew. It wasn't as simple as the hate she had of dark spaces, of people who'd tried to hurt her. It was something else, something ingrained, something she hadn't had to learn.

The dissonance was terrifying.

Then the hairless man vanished, and the next thing El saw was him pressing out of the boards of that shed where the little boy was in, back faced to the hairless man. El ran up to the nothing-something wall, fists thumping against it as she shouted for the boy to run, because she knew.

She was the only one the hairless man wouldn't hurt.

The boy finally turned to face the hairless man, his gun lowered, and El felt trepidation course through her veins as the hairless man screeched, his face opening up into petals of gory flesh.

*The Demogorgon.*

The monster leapt forward, and El instinctively raised her hand to drag it back in, back to where it belonged, away from the boy...

Her mind ached with speed, her own screams deafened her ears...

She had to stop it from doing anything evil; it was her fault it was here, it was all her fault...



Then she was hurled through the air, and before she hit the ground she saw that it was covered with leaves, and with a sinking feeling in her heart she knew she was back in the world that was right-side-up and home to the Bad Place and Papa. It wasn't safe here. It wasn't safe for her. It wasn't...

With a thud she fell onto the earth, and the world faded to black.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I'd actually thought listening to her origin story would be something very serious for El to go through, but when I started writing I realised that humour might be the best way to approach it. It's already heavy enough as it is; why keep raining on that parade? :)

## 14. Fern - Elucidation

### Notes for the Chapter:

Warning: This chapter contains descriptions of two people (who happen to be women) behaving intimately. If you're squeamish about sex, I respect you, do skip the first 1970 part. (PS. This was the reason why I upped the rating from Teen to Mature.)

Warning 2: This contains Fern's backstory. Dark stuff.

### Fern - 1983

“What do you mean, ‘what if It is the answer?’” asked Dom, following behind Fern as she hurried across her lab, dragging her sleeve across her face to dry it of her tears.

“It’s got to be linked to her, linked to everything, somehow. Things only started getting weird in Hawkins after It happened, don’t you realise?” asked Fern, brow furrowed, grabbing her log book off a shelf and procuring a map of Hawkins from another. She swept a bunch of stationery off a tabletop to make space for the map, not minding that the pens and pencils went clattering into the sink.

“This is Hawkins Laboratory,” said Fern, forcibly circling the location with a pencil, “also known as, where Von Braun and Shepard were last seen. *It* travelled over to—where’s Kerley—ah, here it is—”

“Fern, Fern, slow down,” said Dom, raising a hand, “are you saying It has legs or something?”

“I’m saying it’s a living thing, yes. You were the one who said the girl was running away from it. What were *you* thinking?”

“Well, I thought it was some kind of dangerous matter—like the Darkforce.”

“That name reeks of comic books.”

“...So in the Marvel universe—*don’t*, Fern, let me speak—there are a

few characters who can unleash something called the Darkforce. It's mostly fan theory as of now, but we're thinking this power isn't actually a *power*, but a form of matter from a parallel universe the characters can access with their inherent mystical abilities. Perhaps the girl opened the portal to this Darkforce-like thing and it's so powerful that it absorbs people. Extends under the earth or something, sucks them in."

"I won't rule out the possibility completely, but I'd like to gently remind you that you're talking fiction. I'm talking science."

"It's not just fiction; it's *science-fiction*. And face it, Fern—your It-has-legs theory doesn't sound very scientific."

Fern tapped her pencil on the map impatiently. "Fine, we'll put a bookmark in the Darkforce. Look here." Fern pointed to an entry in her log book and made another mark on the map. "This is the Harrington residence, where Barb Holland was last seen. And here—the woods by Kerley and Cornwallis—is where Will Byers's bike was found, and where Bev Mooney's boys disappeared during their hunting trip. They're all really close to the lab, and from what we know, everyone except Shepard disappeared while they were pretty much alone, and after dark. If it's truly a black hole of sorts, extending under the lab like you said, it doesn't make sense that it chooses its victims. Everyone who passes through these areas at night—and to keep the other variable constant: either alone or in relatively small groups—should succumb equally to the effects of the portal."

Fern paused to meet Dom's eyes. "You and I were both in the search party for Will Byers, and several times we strayed away from the main group, but we're still here. The Harrington family is present and accounted for. No State Troopers were harmed in the making of this film, even when they found Will Byers's body after nightfall. You get what I'm saying?"

"It's not a portal," sighed Dom, nodding slowly.

"It's not a portal." Fern jabbed the eraser end of her pencil on the points that she'd marked on the map. "It moves. It's probably like a - a being."

"I don't understand," Dom threw up his hands, "the lab thinks they've got it contained. They cordoned off the East Wing. If It's a being, wouldn't they be able to incarcerate..." Dom stared at the map, then drew in an audible breath as he looked up at Fern.

"A *being*! Like Cloak from *Cloak and Dagger*!" Dom was looking enlightened in his horror. "Fern—what if it's not matter from the realm of the Darkforce, but a being with the power to teleport through that realm and emerge on the other side?"

"I'm losing you, Dom. I thought we were talking about science?"

"Forget science! Anita's kid *defies* science, why should this adhere to natural laws?" Dom started pacing, meeting his palms together as he thought out loud. "This It—what if it's a shadow-walker?"

"Speak English, Dom."

"It can move from place to place by travelling through dimensions. You know, through spacetime. Fern, come on—you're the scientist."

"Right, right, I get it. Special relativity, teleportation—sorry, just needed to suspend my belief."

"Yet," Dom launched into his explanation once again, "it can't go far, as the map has evidenced, so it must be tied to something—a life force of some sort..."

"The girl?"

"The girl." Dom nodded, wide-eyed. "If she escaped from the lab, she couldn't have gone far."

"This means, if we find It, we might be able to find her... And if she's its lifeline, they could be biologically connected..."

"...bringing us back to your theory of how It might hold the answer!" exclaimed Dom, clasping Fern's hands in his.

"You know what this means, right?" said Fern shakily.

Dom nodded. "We have to go to the lab."

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Fern was small, but she was also round, and cramming herself into the foot space of the passenger seat inhibited her breathing a great deal.

They were at the security booth. Fern knew because she was hearing Dom exchange a couple of words with a Thompson, who informed Dom he was the only one on the premises that night. Fern heard the relief in Thompson's voice as he wrote down Dom's ID number, suggesting that they maybe could have a coffee together at midnight if Dom was going to take that long?

"No promises," said Dom kindly, and Fern knew Dom would've said yes if he wasn't on a mission with her.

"Yeah, I get it, you're just here to grab your stuff," said Thompson resignedly. "Just that about eight o'clock they caught some intruders and after that the lot of them stormed out, but not before evacuating all the scientists and going 'Hey Thompson you man the booth we'll pay you double', then I was all alone. It's never happened before, you know? Me being alone. They usually put a young one with me on night watch."

"Yeah. I get you. I'll try to come back later?"

"Sure thing, Dom. Sure thing."

The car started moving again, and Fern saved her questions for later.

Finally Dom killed the engine and uncovered the blanket Fern was hiding under, whispering:

"We're in the parking lot. Let's go."

Breathlessly, Fern tore off the blanket and stumbled out of the car. She had pins and needles in her legs, and there was only one thought running through her mind—

"I need to lose some weight," she grumbled as she got onto the cargo cart Dom had unloaded from the trunk, hugging her bag close to her

chest.

“You just need to eat healthier,” Dom settled a few boxes on either side of her before covering her with a piece of tarp, “less junk food, more vegetables.”

Fern made a face. “Hey Mom, why does all this camouflage smell like kerosene?”

“All the better to burn you with, dear. Camera coming up, stay still,” instructed Dom, and Fern held her breath.

They didn't do this often; twice, perhaps, in the last five years, when there was a sample Dom had smuggled to her as a tin of Earl Grey, and Fern or DARPA decided they needed more, but Dom didn't know where exactly he'd gotten it from and Fern had to access its source.

The lab incinerated all their waste on-site and Dom was in-charge of overseeing the combustion; it was a position that was heaven-sent and Fern couldn't be more thankful. It was mostly chemical waste, and occasionally documents like electrocardiograms and error-filled formula sheets; information that Fern could hopefully use to deduce the experiments that were carried out in the lab. Most of the time her tests were inconclusive, but sometimes she would strike gold and realise they were modifying the brain of a mouse with an illegal chemical compound—things like that kept her in the running for a share of the DARPA budget. Even more rarely she'd pick up some familiar threads and link up Brenner's current projects with what he'd done on Project MKUltra—the framework of her own research—and use it to advance her own findings. It usually wasn't groundbreaking, but at least it was helpful.

They got to the security room. Dom wheeled the cart in, set the brakes, and removed the tarp.

“Work your magic,” said Dom, and from her purse Fern took out the transponder the Duffers had loaned her, switching it on. The CCTV feed immediately synced, freezing the screens while still allowing the clocks to run. God bless those Duffers and the stuff they invented when they were bored.

Together, Fern and Dom looked at the multi-TV setup. The lab, or rather the parts of it that were privy to the people who ran the security room, was eerily empty.

“Thompson mentioned something about intruders, didn’t he?” asked Fern.

“Yeah. Weird that everyone evacuated after the intruders came in, don’t you think?”

“Very.” Fern went very still. “Hey Dom... Do you think this is a trap? Maybe Thompson was lying and they’re really waiting for us inside...”

Dom shrugged. “I don’t think so. Thompson’s fear didn’t look fake. And Fern—we’ve been flying under their radar for twelve years. They don’t expect the guy who supervises the janitors and the lady who looks after the plants to do crazy espionage stuff for the government.”

“I hear you.” Fern let out her breath in a gush of air. “Okay—where’s this East Wing?”

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Like Fern, Dom’s inherent niceness and tight-lipped traits meant he didn’t really have to buy information off people; they just sort of told him things. He had friends on every floor, all of them people who worked for the lab itself. He didn’t fraternise with the military agents—he thought it’d compromise his discretion, and also he didn’t like them much.

All this translated to Dom knowing exactly where they had to go. It wasn’t hard to figure out, combined with his knowledge of where he *wasn’t* supposed to go: as facilities manager, he had access to most of the places in the entire place except a few restricted areas, and they were definitely headed for one of those.

Because there was a biohazard risk, they put on the DARPA-approved hazmat suits that Dom had packed into the boxes he’d taken in with him on his cart, and with another of the Duffers’ smart gadgets they entered the corridor they were looking for, before finding themselves

in a creepy, cavernous, underground room; webbed in a pitch-like substance, peppered with ominous floaters that resembled flakes of dead skin.

“Yuck,” summarised Dom, surveying the room.

Fern approached the part of the web where there was a light pulsating underneath it. It was a warningly torpid picture.

“Do we follow...” Fern trailed off as the slimy fibres came apart when she combed her fingers through them. “Okay, I guess we can enter from here.”

Dom came up beside her. “Shouldn’t you get a sample of that?”

“Good idea.”

Fern detached a couple of test tubes from her belt and collected a bit of fibre and half a tube of slime. She shuddered as she screwed on the lids, wondering what terrors she’d see in the microscope.

Together, Fern and Dom tore through the web to make an opening, and crawled in.

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“Wait, isn’t this—” Fern stopped and spun around on her feet, unclipping the flashlight from its holster on her shoulder to scan the surroundings. It looked exactly like the outside of the lab, except it was covered in the same tar-coloured gel of the opening they had entered from. The dead-skin flakes were floating here too.

“I’m very confused,” said Fern, clutching Dom’s arm.

Dom stood rooted to the spot, travelling his eyes over the dreary scenery.

“Just a thought, Fern,” murmured Dom, “but we could be in *It’s* dimension. And it isn’t a different dimension, not exactly—it’s a parallel one. One that looks like ours. An alternate universe.”



“Okay, I can handle that. Many-worlds. Everett, Schrödinger, Einstein. Paradoxes and cats.”

“I have no idea what you just said, but good that you’re taking it in your stride.” Dom looked down at the map. “Where next?”

They decided to venture into the woods, but Fern was too scared to walk right through them so they went as far down Randolph Lane as they could go—and then they spotted two figures up ahead and everybody froze and then there was a shriek, then Fern was yelling and the men were yelling and someone was asking someone else to not move because they were armed, when finally Fern shouted:

“I’m Fern Thayer and this is my friend Dom Price, who are you?”

This shut the other two hazmat suits up. One of them was carrying something—someone, Fern realised—and Fern couldn’t see their faces because they were 30 feet away. Like the DARPA suits, the other two had on helmets with lights on the inside which illuminated their faces, and as one of them said, incredulously, “Fern Thayer?”, Fern inched forward to recognise the speaker as the Chief of Police.

In his arms was a child with an oxygen mask around his face.

“Isn’t that Joyce Byers?” muttered Dom from beside Fern, pointing at the shorter figure. “I recognise her from the store.”

“I can explain,” said Fern, still advancing, “but I need to find whatever it is that’s making people disappear. After that you can ask me anything you want—”

“Stop!” shouted the Chief. “Who do you work for?”

“Hop, we don’t have time, Will needs to get to the hospital—” Joyce Byers interjected, every syllable leaving her mouth pure panic.

Fern’s mind raced. That child was Will Byers. If the Chief was here, getting Will Byers, it had to mean he was disproving those news reports issued by the state government, which meant he wasn’t on Brenner’s side, at least...

“I’m working for no one!” Fern shouted back. “Brenner and I go way

back. I've been investigating on my own. I want to bring him to justice and see that the lab is shut down."

Fern exchanged a quick look with Dom, who nodded. It wasn't completely a lie.

This seemed to pacify the Chief and Joyce, and they picked up their pace, walking over to where Fern and Dom were.

"There's a monster in here, and you need to leave," said the Chief harshly, pushing past them and heading up onto the street.

"Monster?" echoed Dom.

"I mean this literally. We just came out of its lair," said the Chief, still sounding fierce, "and I swear, that thing will kill you."

Fern followed, though she knew she was moving farther and farther away from what she wanted. "I need to know where it is. Please."

"No, don't go there," said Joyce immediately, and Fern noticed the tear tracks on her face.

"I need genetic material," Fern barrelled on, "skin, or hair, or blood, secretions—"

"What for?" asked the Chief, panting now as he picked up the pace, rounding a corner and approaching the lab.

Fern was desperate; they weren't going to get an opportunity like this anytime soon, and she couldn't just leave this dimension empty-handed. She had to give the Chief a good enough reason to help her, but what would convince him?

"I was a pharmaceutical scientist in a past life, working alongside Brenner on Project MKUltra, making drugs for his test subjects. Long story short, I have beef with him, I moved to Hawkins to spy on him, and with the research I stole from his previous lab I've been running experiments to prove that his work harms people. We need to get Hawkins lab *closed*."

Flabbergasted, Chief Hopper slowed to a stop. He turned to Joyce,

who sighed defeatedly, nodding; she put down the gun and held out her arms to take Will.

“Let me,” volunteered Dom. Dom wasn’t quite as tall as the Chief, but he was well-built and a whole lot more energetic—the Chief wasn’t looking too sprightly that evening.

Joyce looked wary, but Fern whispered: “Please, Joyce. It’s gonna be fine,” and Joyce relented.

“You and Joyce go on ahead,” ordered the Chief to Dom. “I’ll take you to the blood,” he looked at Fern, “and then we get the hell outta here.”

“Thank you,” said Fern, gripping both Chief Hopper and Joyce’s arms in appreciation.

As Chief Hopper led the way, Fern felt her insides churning, attacked by a million questions—had she just jeopardised the entire mission by revealing what she had to Chief Hopper and Joyce Byers, and what kind of ploy was she embroiled in now that she’d just witnessed Will Byers looking quite alive?

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She’d met Karen Wheeler a few years ago, when the Wheelers were looking for a change in their landscaping endeavours and phoned Fern to ask for her take on their yard. They engaged the services of another company in the end, but Fern never forgot Karen—mainly because Karen was very pretty, and had been very pregnant with her third child.

“Karen!” exclaimed Fern. “It’s been too long, hello.” Fern beamed at the little girl in Karen’s arms. “Baby’s so big now!”

“Evening, Fern.” Karen nodded, smiling warmly. “Holly, say ‘Hello, Miss Thayer.’”

“Hello,” said Holly, leaving it at that.

Fern laughed. “Are you here for her check-up?”

They were on the paediatric floor of Hawkins General, and Fern had come to visit Will Byers. (Well, more like visit his mother, but she also wanted to know how Will was doing.)

“Oh, no. My boy, Michael, is here visiting a friend who’s sick. I had to take Holly out of the room because she was scared of the machines. Funny kid, this one.” Karen checked her watch. “We should go soon; we’ve spent an hour here already.”

“Ah. I’ve to visit somebody too,” Fern held up the basket of fruit she’d brought, “so I’ll see you around, all right?”

“Sure,” said Karen. “Holly, Miss Thayer’s leaving, what do you say?”

“Bye,” said Holly, complete with a cute finger-curl wave.

“Bye, Holly,” said Fern, mimicking the wave. She took a step towards the hallway where Will was warded, and so did Karen.

They laughed as they walked, making Holly look curiously on.

“Premature farewells,” said Karen, “always kind of awkward, huh?”

“Always,” agreed Fern. They passed the nurse’s station, and Fern smiled and waved at a nurse she knew.

“How is it that you’re friends with everybody, Fern?” Karen marvelled.

“It’s a small town. I’m an outgoing person with no need to siphon time off for family commitments.”

Karen laughed. “I get it. But you’re genuinely nice, Fern. Few people are like you.”

Fern blushed, but guilt gnawed at her because she knew not all her social pursuits came from real gregariousness. Some of them were vested interests, friends Fern only made so she could gather intel.

They stopped outside Will Byers’s room.

“Oh,” uttered Fern as she realised who Karen’s son was visiting, “I’m

here to see Will too.”

Karen shook her head. “You really do know everybody, don’t you?”

Fern knocked before opening the door, revealing a party of boys updating Will about their first day back at school. Fern guessed they were in middle school; something had happened there the night Fern and Dom broke into the lab, leading to some damage, but there was a good month left before school let out for Christmas and the town elected to have the kids return to normal classes as soon as possible.

“Boys,” Karen called to the three adolescents who weren’t Will, “time to go.”

The boy in front of Fern went to join his friends, standing by the bed to protest, and Joyce stood up from her chair, exchanging a look with Karen before playing the *Will-needs-to-rest* card. It took all of five minutes for the boys to wrap up their farewell as they promised to bring comic books and games for Will the next time they visited, and the brochure for the new Heathkit.

These kids were nerds, thought Fern fondly. They reminded her of Dom. (Not that she wasn’t a nerd herself; she was a *complete* nerd, albeit a different kind.)

Karen and the boys left, and then it was just Will, Joyce and Fern in the room.

Fern held up the fruit basket, smiling at Will. “Hey buddy, I know you don’t really know me, but I help mow a lot of lawns in Hawkins?”

Will smiled back. “Hello.”

“Will, Miss Thayer was one of the first who responded to, um,” Joyce suddenly looked uncomfortable, “calls to search for you...”

“I hope you like the seasonal classics,” Fern quickly cut in, “these and these, namely.” She pointed to the apples and pears.

Will chuckled. “Yes, I do. Thank you.”

Fern cast Joyce a meaningful look before turning back to Will. “D’you think I could borrow your mom for a bit, Will?”

“Sure.” Will nodded.

Together Fern and Joyce exited the room, settling down in the cushioned chairs of the visitors’ space outside.

Fern sucked in air past her teeth. “Joyce, I wanted to see *you*, actually. To apologise.”

“What for?”

“Dom and I must’ve given you a shock during your rescue mission, probably delayed you guys; I’m sure you could’ve gotten Will here sooner—”

“Oh, Fern, no.” Joyce put a hand on Fern’s arm. “Dom was a great help, he picked up blankets on the way out, led us straight to the exit... I’m very thankful.”

“Really?” Fern felt a rush of relief; it’d been bugging her the entire week.

Joyce smiled and nodded, clutching Fern’s hand. Then her expression shifted.

“You said you moved to Hawkins to - to *spy* on the lab?” asked Joyce. “So you knew all this time what was happening?”

Fern immediately swung her head around to see if anybody else was listening. The coast seemed clear, so she turned back to Joyce, who was looking quite sorry for blurting her question.

“Joyce, I hope you don’t blame me for not speaking up. I couldn’t have prevented what happened in the lab, you have to understand. It’s run by some very powerful people.”

“You don’t have to defend yourself—they cuffed and detained me, Fern. They bugged all the phones! I don’t blame you at all; I know the monsters you were up against.”

Fern nodded, keeping her voice low. "I had to bide my time. People have tried and failed to bring Brenner down; I had to do it right. I needed all the evidence I could get."

"Otherwise you'd end up another Terry Ives," said Joyce, a knowing look coming upon her face.

Fern's mouth fell open. "How did you—you *know Terry*?"

Joyce seemed surprised at Fern's reaction. "Hop found out about her; we drove out to Roderfort to see her just... God, not even two weeks ago. Feels like an eternity back. How do you know Ter—oh," Joyce blinked, "Dr. Brenner's old lab."

"When it ended, we sort of banded together. Long story for another time." Fern released a trembling breath, amazed at how much Joyce knew.

Terry's story had been covered in the *national papers*; how could she have forgotten? Fern had even had to deal with that persistent, demanding feminist—*Bridges*, that was her name—from the *New York Times*... The clippings had probably been put on microfiche, lying asleep in libraries all around the country for anyone to discover.

And Joyce and the Chief had unearthed more than Fern thought anyone unconnected to Brenner's experiments ever could.

Fern's eyes snapped open.

If Joyce and the Chief knew this much, was it possible that they knew about the girl?

It was a wild hope, but was it possible... they knew where the girl was?

"Joyce," Fern turned her stare onto Joyce, "if you met Terry... Did she tell you anything about a missing child?"

Joyce wrung her hands, forehead wrinkling. "She couldn't tell us much."

"Right," Fern nodded, remembering, "Terry's not exactly great at

conversations right now.”

Fern summoned the strength to smile despite the sinking in her heart. It was a shot in the dark anyway. Joyce had had enough drama with Will missing, surely she wouldn't have come across Anita's girl in all the chaos.

“Terry's sister was there to fill us in, however,” said Joyce. “We learned about her daughter?” Joyce paused to take a breath. “And I think I met her. I can't be sure, but it could very well have been her. Hop thinks it is.”

Oh god. What?

“You *met* the girl?” asked Fern.

Joyce nodded, looking pained. “She helped me find Will.”

“How?”

Joyce looked at Fern, hesitant.

“Right, she has *powers*,” realised Fern. “Of course.”

A tremendous hope sparked in Fern. This hadn't been where she'd intended to direct the conversation; she'd wanted to ease Joyce into her own story, tell her how Terry was connected to all of it, but here Joyce was, telling her that Anita's baby was alive.

“I've been struggling...” Joyce's eyes became wells of pity, her voice suddenly coloured with remorse. “I met Terry, and I felt really sorry for her. I can't help but wonder if I could have helped her reunite with her daughter. I mean, I got Will back, and thinking about Terry just made me... I don't know, it just weighs on my conscience, somehow. It's like I survived something, but Terry didn't. My nightmare lasted six nights; Terry's will last the rest of her life.”

Fern's anticipation started to fade as she realised what Joyce was saying.

“What happened to the girl?” asked Fern, her heart thumping in her throat for fear of the answer.



Joyce looked up, biting on her lip. “I shouldn’t be telling you any of this. Hop told me I had to keep my mouth shut, oh God—”

Fern knew she’d just played Joyce’s confessional; Joyce had been close to bursting and Fern had shown up right in front of her. Fern knew all too well how people often entrusted their secrets to kindred strangers: those people who weren’t close enough to betray you, yet were just familiar enough to open up to.

Fern’s reputation in Hawkins also gave her a lot of credit, since it was mostly built upon her ability to keep a secret. But just as Fern wooed the domestic citizens of the gossip network to confide in her, Joyce attracted people’s attention because of her problems. The shouting match she had with her eldest son in the middle of the street the week prior had been the talk of the town; unkind words had been thrown about in thoughtless whispers, but now that Will was found, people were looking at Joyce with kinder, more apologetic eyes.

So it wasn’t weird that Joyce was letting her guard down around Fern; with all that pressure, it was a wonder Joyce hadn’t actually broken down.

“Joyce,” Fern placed a hand encouragingly on Joyce’s knee, “I’ll sew my mouth shut. I promise.”

The struggle on Joyce’s face was plain; it also meant Fern was close, very close to learning about the girl—

“I’m sorry. I can’t tell you any more,” said Joyce resolutely, getting up. “It might get a lot of people into trouble. I know you won’t say anything, but I promised Hop.”

“Wait,” said Fern, hooking a hand around Joyce’s elbow, her pulse racing again. She was terrified; she knew she could be severely prosecuted for making this offer, but she really needed the Chief and Joyce on her side. She needed to know what they knew. She had to find out more about the girl, cling on to the hope that she could still be alive.

“The moment you have the time, come to my home with Chief Hopper.” Fern gulped. “I’ll show you my version of a government lab,

and tell you everything I know about the other one.”

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Hawkins had already started preparing for Christmas the night the Chief and Joyce showed up on Fern’s doorstep. Fern wordlessly led them into her house and locked the door, the bells on the wreath outside chiming merrily in juxtaposition to Fern’s mood.

She was scared—scared that she was putting her trust in the wrong people, that Hopper’s loyalty lay in things beyond the good of the town and his friendship with Joyce.

Fern and Hopper hadn’t spoken since the night they’d bumped into each other in that strange, ugly world. Granted, the town was abuzz with rumours about what happened and Hopper was busy with damage control; Fern knew she was on the back burner because Hopper knew Fern wasn’t going to spill to anyone, especially not when Hawkins Lab was going to stay open. Fern hadn’t yet finished her job. Hopper was smart enough to figure that out.

Hopper’s damage control included nipping a few lawsuits in the bud by swooping down on the parents who wanted to sue the lab after hearing what their children had to say—the Wheelers and the Hollands, most prominently. Hopper had them convinced that they couldn’t win, that they were fighting against an enemy way out of their league.

It sounded a lot like Hopper was trying to get them off the CIA’s back.

But, Fern remembered, Hopper had been decent to her the night Will got rescued. He’d led Fern to Joyce’s parallel-universe house to get blood and tissue samples from the carpet. He didn’t say a word throughout—Fern guessed it’d been very confusing and drastic for Hopper too.

“I want to trust you,” said Fern, not sparing any time. “I have to trust you, because you’re here tonight and there’s no turning back for me.”

Joyce and Hopper had on identical expressions of bewilderment.

“Fern,” Hopper began, sounding gruff, “I came tonight because I wanted to make sure—”

“—that I don’t dig into what happened that night, I know.” Fern knew the Chief was protecting something; she’d figured that out the moment Joyce said she wasn’t supposed to speak about the girl. “I’m aware you’re guarding secrets because you don’t want to implicate the innocent. I’m the same, Chief. That’s why I need your help. And I’m sure you’re curious to know my side of the story.”

Taking a deep breath, Fern tugged open the casement in the floor, revealing a flight of stairs. She beckoned for Joyce and Hopper to follow.

“This project was part personal gain, part government directive,” said Fern as she descended the steps into the lab. “The government part is easier to explain, so I’ll start with that first.”

Fern told them how the big shots in the Department of Defence but outside of the CIA had caught on to Brenner, and how they funded Fern’s research because they knew Brenner had harboured a human weapon, a vestige of his time on Project MKUltra; how Fern and DARPA worked together to come up with a drug that would deactivate the effects of Brenner’s work; and how the Department of Defence was trying to cover up its own tracks since they realised the CIA had let things get completely out of hand.

“—so, because we don’t actually have the authority to undermine the CIA, if they know we know, it’ll be really easy to implicate us. That’s why the bigwigs on this side of the circus are being so covert,” finished Fern.

Hopper and Joyce were staring at her in disbelief.

Fern scoffed. “Hey, you don’t get to look at me like that. *Your* story had a monster in it.”

Recovering, Hopper asked: “When you say human weapon, you mean...”

Fern met Hopper’s eyes.

“The girl, yes,” said Fern, her voice softer now. “Where is she?”

Joyce slanted her eyes downward to contemplate a nearby petri dish; Hopper stood unmoving, considering Fern.

“What do you want with her?” asked Hopper cautiously.

Joyce cocked her head to face Hopper, frowning at him. “Hop, I thought the boys said she—” Joyce fell quiet when Hopper held up a hand and gave a small shake of his head.

“I want to deactivate her powers,” said Fern levelly, answering Hopper’s question.

Hopper frowned. “Will it hurt her?”

“It’s a needle up the spine,” said Fern, raising her eyebrows. Did Hopper actually care for the girl? Fern stowed away her surprise at this seeming revelation. She didn’t know much about Hopper besides his drinking and philandering ways, but he was revealing himself to be more than what the grapevine claimed he was.

“So you’re saying,” Hopper’s eyes narrowed, “you take away her powers, and she can be a normal little girl? Go back to her family?”

Fern stalled. “She’s not Terry Ives’s kid, Chief.” Fern felt like something was goring her in the chest as she thought about the girl’s mother. “Terry miscarried; the baby Brenner took belonged to somebody else.”

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Fern - 1970

She was dark-haired and porcelain-skinned, full-lipped and blue-eyed, and as she stared at Fern in the mirror she gave a knowing grin that made Fern feel naked.

“You were checking out her ass,” said the woman, laughing and

propping herself against the sink, leaning close to the mirror to reapply her blood-red lipstick. "The girl who just left. You were totally checking out her ass."

Fern wished away the heat in her face as hard as she could. "I don't talk to strangers," said Fern, turning on the faucet and pumping soap into her palm.

Laughing, the woman kept her lipstick in her purse and adjusted her ponytail. "You're talking to me."

Fern ignored her, concentrating on lathering, until the woman took a step closer—she was a whole head taller than Fern—and said:

"Anita." The woman extended her hand for a shake.

Fern's eyebrows lifted. "I don't know if you washed your hands."

Something lit in Anita's eyes as she owned an impish smile; she landed her fingertips on Fern's shoulder and crept them down her sleeve of her lab coat before dragging them across the underwire of Fern's bra.

Seconds later they were undressing each other in a locked bathroom stall, trying to mute their gasps as their mouths met again and again, electrifying kiss after electrifying kiss.

This wasn't her thing, Fern thought as Anita undid her ponytail, taking Fern's attention away from Anita's breasts; Fern slid her fingers up Anita's neck, raking them through the soft, luscious curls.

"I don't usually like having bathroom trysts at work," whispered Fern as Anita sat on the covered toilet seat and spread Fern's legs across the top of her thighs.

"Every sentence you've uttered so far started with 'I don't'—how about telling me your name?" said Anita, putting their faces close.

Anita's lipstick was smeared all around her mouth (and probably Fern's as well), but Fern found it incredibly sexy.

"I'm Fern," breathed Fern, and Anita slipped her hand past the

waistband of Fern's panties.

"Hello, Fern. And just so you know—I did wash my hands."

Fern could only whimper in response as Anita's fingers found their place.

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"Fern." Dom threw up his hands in exasperation. "I'm telling you, this is a bad decision. *Stay.*"

"No." Fern taped the packing box shut. "You're just saying that because I'm moving out and leaving you to pay the rent alone."

"No, Fern, I'm saying this because you're moving in with a pregnant, drug-abusing, jobless twenty-four-year-old you barely know."

Fern glared at Dom. "Three months, Dom. We've known each other three whole months. And she's in-between jobs. Not jobless."

Dom shrugged. "Facts."

"She's trying to get sober." Fern started taping another box. "She'll do it for the baby and me."

"She's *lying*, Fern. She's four months pregnant and she's been using all this while! Come on, wake up. She wants to get close to you so you can give her free drugs."

"That's enough, Dom." Fern angrily cut the end of the tape and slapped it against the cardboard. "I've never fed her addiction."

"Yeah, like you don't make the drugs in the lab that pays her to take them," said Dom, oozing caustic sarcasm. "You're going to get hurt. I've met her, Fern. She was high *the whole time.*"

"Listen, Dom," Fern spun on her heel and pulled on Dom's shoulder so their faces were level, "we have a shot at this, Anita and I. I know she has her demons. But she wants a fresh start—she's quit the experiment, she wants us to raise the baby together, to have a life

together. *I'm* included in her plans, Dom. She will try for me."

"You are not *rehab*, Fern."

"No, Dom." Fern held up a finger in warning. "You don't get to stereotype her. Just because she is who she is, it doesn't make her your alcoholic mother!"

"...What the hell, Fern," said Dom, quiet rage now apparent on his face.

"Your childhood left a bad taste in your mouth, and now you're trying to - to parent me so I don't live your life." The words left a bitter taste in Fern's mouth, but she felt it needed to be said.

Dom turned his back on Fern and headed for the kitchen.

"You do whatever you want, Fern. I was just trying to be a good friend," he said coldly.

With tears in her eyes, Fern snapped her suitcase shut and dragged it across the apartment to the door. She knew she had hurt Dom, but he was being horrible and judgemental. She'd show him. She'd show him that Anita was capable of change.

\*\*\*

There were good days—days where they would just lie in each other's arms and dream out loud, pretending reality was but a fictional land far away. Anita would be a teacher; she would teach children how to finger-paint and sing nursery rhymes and read them stories with talking animals that showed humans how to be nice to one another.

Fern's fantasy wasn't as concrete; she just wanted to live with Anita and their child, tend the garden, cook meals, and perhaps have a pet.

"What kind of pet?" asked Anita, pressing their foreheads together.

"Anything but reptiles," answered Fern.

“Aw, not even turtles?”

“They smell.”

Anita rolled her eyes, about to retort, but Fern silenced her with a kiss.

They were very similar, in many ways, despite Fern being six years older and Anita actually being bisexual; they'd both been born to wealthy, deeply religious parents, and had been shunned by said parents for their 'sinful rebellion against nature', which was why they moved away from home. They were both smart and sharp and sassy; both graduated college with some version of Cum Laude; and both were outgoing, people-loving people.

But there was an eminent divide in the way they socialised. Anita loved the night life and could go really wild, partying uninhibitedly with different groups of friends night after night and waking up not knowing where she was. It was how she got pregnant: the cliché, drunken mistake that involved a guy who'd offered her cocaine at a bar.

Fern's idea of a social event was organising a community service flea market and hanging out with the volunteer vendors after for board games and burgers. She'd been afraid Anita would find it juvenile, but Anita had hugged her and said being with Fern made her a better person.

But on bad days—and there were many—Anita would be curled up in bed after working at yet another odd job, crying mascara-tainted tears into the pillow, and she wouldn't speak at all. Sometimes she would disappear, and Fern would call the police, but after the third time it happened Fern learnt to call numbers other than '911'—there was Adam and Nelea and Kai and most recently, Terry, a college student Anita had bonded with in a waiting room of the lab, which was how Fern found out Anita was still participating in the experiments.

All of Anita's friends were fond of narcotics, and didn't seem to care that she was pregnant.



On several occasions, Fern found Anita submerged in the bathtub, sometimes thrashing, and every time Anita would claim it'd been an accident; she'd 'gotten too sleepy' during her bath. It took Fern breaking down on their bathroom floor for Anita to confess she was trying to mimic the feeling she got when she was in the isolation tanks.

Fern had never been to the floor where experiments were actually conducted; she was just the pharmaceutical scientist who spent all her time in a laboratory with chemicals and machines, engineering drugs to meet the requests of the front-end scientists—a job she was starting to question now that she'd learnt they didn't turn away pregnant women—and while she had a vague idea what was going on, that she was 'contributing to a good cause' (something her boss Dr Brenner kept emphasising on at annual general meetings), she never knew what exactly happened to the test subjects.

Until now.

"It's the only time I feel safe," said Anita, hugging her knees in the water. "I close my eyes, and there is nothing but a single wooden chest in pitch-black darkness. I open the chest, put everything that's bad in it, and lock it up. Sometimes it rattles with all the evil that's struggling to get out, but it can't, because I have the key. I'm in control."

Fern edged across the tiles to clutch the rim of the bathtub. "But when you do it, I always think you're trying to drown yourself."

"I'm not." Anita covered Fern's hand with her wet one.

"You've come close."

Anita looked at Fern, blinking away the tears that pooled in her eyes. "Maybe sometimes I just want to stay in my head longer."

"Why?" asked Fern, starting to cry again. "Is this reality so difficult for you, Anita? It has me. Aren't you happy with me?"

"I *am* happy with you, but you - you're so *good*." Anita turned her face away from Fern. "And I'm messed up, Fern. Being with you

makes me see that in painful clarity. I feel that once you leave the room I'm back to being the fuck-up I am."

"Then I'll be with you. For as long as you want. I'll stay at home with you until you get better. I don't mind quitting my job anyway; the longer I stay at that lab the more I wonder if the drugs I'm making are really helping America's war efforts. And I have savings, they should be able to tide us over for a while, so when the baby comes I'll find part-time work—"

"Don't, Fern. I'm already sucking you dry, with the rent and the bills and the food money—I don't want to rely any more on you."

"I want this," said Fern fiercely, reaching across the tub to cup Anita's cheek. "I want you. I want the baby. We're going to be one of those new-age families with two moms, remember? And—"

"—I don't love this baby enough to quit drugs, Fern!" Anita's voice cracked as it rose. "I keep trying, and I keep giving up. But when I'm in that world in my head," Anita gave a dry laugh, "I have that key, and I've put all that guilt and all that despair into that chest so it can't contaminate me anymore; and I hold on to the key so tight, because I'm afraid I'll lose it and someone would find it and open up that wooden chest; but then I open my eyes and realise that I'm that someone; and there is no chest, there is no key; and all I am is a monster."

\*\*\*

Fern - 1983

It was a harrowing story that Fern had never related to anyone except Dom, and even then Dom had been around to witness most of it, though they had technically been fighting at the time and hadn't spoken to each other at work.

She could tell Hopper and Joyce were puzzled; they knew Terry's story, the one that was printed in the papers. And they'd gleaned some information from Becky, all of which was true—Terry had

indeed been a subject of Brenner's experiments, she had indeed been pregnant when she took the drugs Brenner gave her (and Fern concocted), and her baby was supposed to have powers, if she had managed to carry it to term.

"The drugs were too strong for Terry's baby. She miscarried in the third trimester, about a week after the girl was born to her mother, Anita," said Fern.

The silence in the room was punctuated by the whirring of a machine in the corner, synthesising the latest version of Fern's serum formula.

"Terry and Anita weren't the only pregnant test subjects. There were plenty of others; addicts who got pregnant, dirt-poor women who really needed the money, people who didn't really need money wanting to do it anyway—"

"Are you saying," Hopper interjected, "that Brenner *intentionally* experimented on pregnant mothers?"

"Yes."

"But Terry's sister said Terry wasn't aware of her pregnancy at the time."

Fern closed her eyes, fisting her hands on the tabletop. This was why she didn't like telling people what happened. It was something she'd also found out by digging, and it'd been a cruel shock, realising she'd had a hand in all of it.

"No," voiced Hopper as he hit upon something, "the lab knew she was pregnant before she did."

Joyce's jaw went slack. "That's *inhuman*."

Fern clenched her jaw. "Now you understand why I want Brenner's work to be completely eradicated, and why I'm trying to pay for having a part to play."

"But why did Terry say that the doctor took her kid?" asked Joyce. "If people found her out, she could've been charged."

“She was angry. She blamed Brenner for the death of her daughter, and because she knew he had a real live baby in his custody—Anita’s—she claimed the child to be her own. It wasn’t too hard to do; the mother was dead, and she and Terry had been experimented on the exact same way. If Terry’s baby hadn’t died, it probably would’ve been Terry’s story too.”

“Why would Terry take that long shot?”

“She was a mother desperate for justice.” Fern looked pointedly at Joyce. “She would’ve done anything.”

They were all quiet for a while.

“What I can’t figure out,” Hopper broke the silence, “is how you fit into all of it.”

Fern knew this was coming. She decided to spare Hopper and Joyce the sordid details, and went for the version of the story that would get her judged the least—not that there could be any further deploring of her character at this point.

“I was just a small fry in one of the labs at Brenner’s facility, working on finding the best recipe of drugs that would help expand the human mind. Brenner was our leader—a very kind, persuasive man who had a way with words, who made you feel important regardless of what he thought of you. And I respected him. We all did. And us scientists at the back-end, we only had a vague idea of what was going on. We thought all the pregnant ladies were doing it willingly, and we worked hard to make the drugs as safe as LSDs could be.

“Brenner had started experimenting on expectant mothers after some fluke that involved a pregnant addict. He found out the baby was responding to the drugs better than the mother; that was when he realised there was some sort of amplification going on in the foetal stage.

“The women were given drugs and put in isolation tanks, and some of them actually exhibited supernatural abilities in there. With their minds, they could move objects, switch the lights on and off, things like that. Once they got out, however, their powers would be lost.

The babies in their wombs, on the other hand, still managed to emit enough electromagnetic pulses to be recorded on the machines. There was a good chance these babies would be born with powers. One of my friends working as a neuro consult alongside Brenner told me Brenner used to say the kids would make up a future generation of protectors.”

Fern paused to right her thoughts. This was a lot of messed-up to confess. She had Hopper and Joyce captivated all right, but their rapture was stony at best.

“I never had business in the rooms where they kept the isolation tanks so I hardly ever met the test subjects, but we were all in the same building, and inevitably I would bump into some of them in the women’s restrooms. That was where I met Anita. She’d been volunteering in the programme for about a year. Later, she introduced me to Terry, whom she’d met while they were being prepped for the experiment.

“Anita and I became roommates, but two months before the baby was due she disappeared, leaving a note asking me not to find her.” Fern bit her lip to keep from crying. “The next I heard from her was when she went into labour. She asked if I could be there for the birth because she was scared to death, but when I got to the hospital, I was told I wasn’t allowed in the birthing room. Hours later, I saw a female colleague walk out of the hospital with her husband and a baby, but it didn’t register as anything until I finally got to Anita’s room. She was weeping, asking for her baby, but the doctor kept apologising, and that was when I found out that child protection services had taken the baby away. Of course I thought it was because they dug deep into Anita’s substance abuse history, but Anita started swearing at the doctors, claiming that they sedated her after she gave birth, and a scientist from the experiment had come and kidnapped her daughter.

“It was then I remembered why I even looked at that female coworker from the lab—I never saw her being pregnant before, that’s why it was so weird that she had a baby in her arms.

“Shortly after, Anita died at home from an overdose. She’d phoned Terry just before she OD-ed, making Terry swear to protect her own

kid. Terry also got paranoid, but when she went for her doctor's visit a while later, they couldn't find a heartbeat—they had to get the baby out."

Hopper sighed and rubbed his temples, propping himself up with his elbows on the tabletop. "And the lawsuit that came after?"

"Some reporter from the *New York Times* was doing a feature; she convinced Terry that with the power of the media they could take Brenner down. She'd written this article in '71 exposing the project—it gained a lot of traction but eventually fizzled out—and she was trying to revive her career by raking up the past and have Terry frontline her *Down With Brenner* campaign. Apparently the reporter's brother had been involved in another experiment Brenner ran, and they had vested interest in the whole thing; they just needed a more solid case to sue. Terry went right ahead and said she'd help them."

"By plagiarising Anita's story," said Hopper.

"Yes."

"Why didn't you help them?" asked Joyce. "Weren't you all on the same side?"

"It was four years after the Project was shut down; I was already involved with DARPA at the time, and we knew right from the beginning it was going to take a really long time for our plan to succeed. Terry's lawsuit, on the other hand, took only a year to process. She was impatient. She couldn't wait for me. I told her to drop the case because she was going to lose—it was obvious; she was up against the CIA, there was no way..."

The three of them lapsed into an oppressive silence; Fern knew her past was a dark thing to digest.

"She's hiding," Hopper suddenly said, meeting Fern's eyes. "The girl."

"Okay," Fern got up to her feet, every thrum of her quickening pulse echoing in her ears, "do you think it'd be all right... if I met her?"

Hopper hesitated.

"You *know* where she is?" asked Joyce; and Fern couldn't understand why, but Joyce seemed exasperated with Hopper.

Hopper turned to Joyce. "She's in the Upside Down."

"*What?*"

"That day, when she came out of the pool?"

Joyce paused to think. "We were with her together; I was drying her off..."

Fern wasn't making sense of the conversation, but she inched closer to listen.

Hopper went on: "And I gave her my shirt, and told her that if she ever needed help—"

"—she had to look for you," finished Joyce, gasping.

Hopper nodded before facing Fern. "And she did."

\*\*\*

Fern knocked on the door because the doorbell never worked, and she gave a little wave when she saw Becky's face poking past the curtain to look out the glass.

Becky grinned and opened the door.

Fern smiled. "Merry Christmas."

Becky let Fern in before holding out her arms for a hug. "Thank you so, so much for coming."

"Come on, Becks. I come here two Sundays a month; more than I go to church."

"Yes, but it's *Christmas Day*. You must have plans."

"And you must have work."

“As always. But extra pay for the holidays, so that’s a plus.”

“Good for you.” Fern studied Becky’s outfit. She was wearing a sheath dress and pumps; definitely meeting a man tonight. “Enjoy your date. I’ll let myself out after settling Terry in bed.”

Becky laughed and gave Fern a kiss on the cheek. “Lunch is in the fridge. See ya, Fern. Merry Christmas.”

Fern had started visiting Terry ever since she learnt that Terry had moved to Roderfort, which was an hour away from Hawkins driving in the opposite direction from Indianapolis. She’d introduced herself to Becky as an old friend of Terry’s; Becky had been wary at first, especially since Fern didn’t have proof of them being friends, but when Fern produced Terry’s phone number and managed to name Terry’s cat and the gynaecologist she’d been visiting, Becky believed that Fern truly had been a friend.

That had been almost six years prior, and Terry hadn’t gotten any better.

Fern entered the living room. “Hey, Terry.”

All Fern got was a blank stare. The TV was airing a Sears commercial, and Fern paused to watch it. “Fifty per cent off of that cassette car stereo, but I still don’t see how it’s worth a hundred bucks. How ‘bout you, Terry?”

Terry still didn’t respond.

Fern picked up the book on bonsai that she’d left by Terry’s side weeks before. “Game for another chapter? I think it’s about trimming tools.”

Together, they read; or rather, Fern read to Terry. It was like this every second and fourth Sunday of the month, for the past six years. Unless she had a prior appointment, Fern would relieve Becky of Terry-sitting duties from 11 in the morning, and go back to Hawkins at eight. After making sure Terry had eaten lunch, Fern would settle down at the dining table to read research reports sent over by DARPA, findings from other researchers working on nervous system



drugs not unlike her own.

When the chapter ended and Fern was thoroughly educated about how to pick the best shears to trim a small Asian tree, she closed the book.

“You know, Brenner’s dead.”

Terry blinked.

“Yeah. But I feel like things have gone right in the wrong way because I can’t go through DARPA’s channels to close up the lab. But we’re working on it.” Fern put the book back on the rack beside Terry. “And I found Anita’s kid with the help of some new friends.” Fern smiled. “They’re good people; I think you’ve met them before—Chief Hopper and Joyce Byers?”

Terry’s eyes shifted to Fern’s face for the briefest of moments before returning to the TV.

“I told them I want to raise the girl as my own, and they’ve agreed to help me meet her. She really likes Joyce, and I suspect she only trusts the Chief because he gives her food.” Fern laughed before her expression turned wistful. “Funny how things turned out, huh? If you hadn’t taken Brenner to court, they wouldn’t have figured out anything about the girl.”

Terry stared at the Sears commercial that had come on again.

“Thanks, Terry.” Fern folded Terry’s hand in hers. “It’s been quite the journey, but I think now I can safely say: I forgive you completely.”

\*\*\*

Fern - 1975

“You’re just going to get hurt, Terry!” shouted Fern.

“Terry, don’t listen to her,” urged Bridges, “once the article comes

out, there's no way they can back down—"

"Don't go on trial, please," begged Fern, ignoring Bridges, who was still trying to speak over her. "If you want revenge, let's just bide our time—let me find a cure for the child, then we bring Brenner down together."

"It's been how many years now that Terry has had to suffer this pain, Miss Thayer? You're being selfish. And think about it, those people are dangerous; they might even kill the little girl!"

"You don't know anything about them." Fern tasted fury on her tongue. "You're just using the tragedy of others to advance your career, you psychopath."

Bridges gaped at her, too livid to speak.

"*Enough*," said Terry, walking over to Fern. She pointed to Bridges. "Tanya is trying to help me, Fern. We've gotten four other people to step forward—you're the one too scared to testify, and *you* come to my home to lecture *me* about what to do?"

Fern stared up at Terry's hardened features. "I'm not scared," said Fern. "You want to destroy them? You have to root everything out. You need hard evidence, Terry. Just the statements of a few witnesses won't cut it."

Terry stilled for a moment.

"Oh, I see," said Terry, closing her eyes and laughing as she nodded, arriving at a thought. "I see it now: you don't care about my baby at all. You talk about finding the cure, about seeking justice for me, but you're not doing it *for me*." Terry scoffed. "How could I have been so stupid? My baby *died*, so it's *nothing* to you. Anita's baby is all you care about!"

"Terry, that's not—"

Terry suddenly clutched Fern's shoulders, making her freeze in shock. Terry wasn't usually this... physical.

"I'll have you know, Fern Thayer, that you don't own Anita, or her

baby, or her story!” screamed Terry, shaking Fern. “Sure, you fucked her, but that doesn’t give you any rights!” She let go of Fern, roughly, and turned to Bridges.

“Oh yes, this one and Anita were a pair of queer bitches. You should write about that.”

Fern turned and ran out of the apartment, sobbing all the way down the stairs. She tore across the street to her car, where Dom was waiting for her in the driver’s seat.

“Oh god, what happened?” asked Dom, scooping Fern into a hug.

Fern just cried, and cried, and cried.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Well, you might've guessed that this was the hardest chapter to write. First of all, it's really long--10 000 words--and it's very heavy. I cried a lot writing the Fern and Anita bits, not gonna lie. Because Fern and Anita are actually my own creations, I felt so much emotion when I wrote them because I know their entire backstory, personalities and struggles. Apart from me having the stomach flu, a sinus infection and menstrual cramps ALL AT THE SAME TIME LOL, the reason why this update took over two weeks was because of this bit. It was just really, really hard to write.

Also, I'm very sorry, Terry. I cried a lot for her too, because in this story, her baby really died, and her campaign was really futile, and she lost her sanity in the process. Please know I've portrayed Becky as telling the truth when she said in Season 1 Episode 6 that the drugs 'messed her up good'--in the context of this story, I think Terry was already teetering on the edge by 1975, that's why she behaved so harshly to Fern. The Terry that Anita knew was a lot sweeter than this.

## 15. Mike - I'm just a guy

### Notes for the Chapter:

This is really short, but it was awesome to write because I laughed a lot at Mike's expense, and it really helped me recover from the extreme grief the previous chapter caused me. Enjoy!

### Mike

Mike lurched across the carpet to grab El's briefcase and locate her painkillers. He found them in an envelope, but was unable to read the dosage and didn't know how many tablets to give her.

El was curled up in a foetal position on the bed, whimpering. He'd spent the past ten minutes calling out to her, but she hadn't responded.

*Think, Wheeler*, Mike willed himself before striding into the bathroom to wet a towel to make a cold compress. He went out into the room again and flicked the switch on the electric kettle on, boiling the water once more.

Putting the towel on the table, Mike tucked his arms under El and carried her, positioning her so that her head was resting on the pillows. He drew the covers over her and started sponging her face with the towel. Her eyes were closed, her features contorted; she was making sounds, but he understood none of them.

"Come on, El," muttered Mike. "You're scaring me."

El woke up gasping for air.

"El!" Mike cried, falling back. "Oh my god, are you—"

El clapped her hand over her mouth and scrambled across the bed to get to the bathroom, and Mike heard her being sick. He quickly went over and found her crouched over the toilet, kneeling on the bathroom floor. Mike wet the towel again, wrung it as well as he could, and put it against the back of her neck.

El looked up. "This headache is maiming me."

"I can tell."

El heaved again, and Mike folded the towel so it was a proper rectangle that could be draped over El's neck. El groaned as she fumbled for some toilet paper.

"Don't use that. Here, tissues." Mike snatched up the box that was lying on the bathroom vanity and handed it to El.

"Thanks." El sniffled. "I'm sorry you have to see me like this."

Mike laughed. "Well, you did see me cry just now. And you know what they say: nothing like puking in front of someone to cement a —"

"Oh my god, Mike—what time is it?" squawked El, shooting up to her feet and cringing as she pressed the heel of her palm against her forehead.

"Almost seven."

"Crap, we have to leave! You'll miss your flight!"

"Oh, no," said Mike firmly, "no flight. I can stay one more day."

"But Mike—"

Mike pinched El's lips shut with his thumb and forefinger.

"Let me stay one more day."

\*\*\*

The front desk had people who spoke English, so Mike had no problem asking for an extension on his stay. He got off the phone and checked on the tea he was making for El.

The way he was feeling—'worry' wasn't enough to describe it. He hated seeing her in pain; he hated the way his heart seemed to clench in his gut whenever she entered that debilitated state.

“El,” said Mike, carrying the tea over to the bed, “I was just wondering—do you really have to go home tonight?”

He could practically see El’s face transform into pure mortification as she completely misunderstood.

Ears flaming, Mike tried again: “I mean, would you like to stay the night?”

“Uh...”

“Right,” Mike shook his head, “that wasn’t an improvement.” He drew a deep breath.

“I’m not comfortable with you being alone at home; or travelling home alone, for that matter. If you could stay the night, it’d be a load off my mind. Sorry it sounds so selfish, but it’s true. I’m perfectly fine with sleeping on the floor, so you don’t have to worry about—” Mike stalled. “Okay, I’m not sure how I was going to finish that sentence. You get the picture.”

El’s features relaxed into a smile. “It depends on whether you have clean clothes I could borrow.”

Mike reached into his suitcase and took out a brand new *I love Tokyo* souvenir T-shirt. “This was for my dad, but I guess it’s yours now.”

\*\*\*

It wasn’t until Mike heard the shower running that it struck him that El was going to spend the night with him in close quarters, and he had to dump his face in his hands and think unsexy thoughts so he wouldn’t get carried away.

“Farts,” Mike said out loud. He let out his breath in a whoosh of air, knowing he had to do better than that. “FARTS!”

In the shower, El turned the water off.

“What?” she called.

“Nothing!” Mike shouted back.

The sound of running water came on again, and he struggled to picture El bundled up in layers and layers of *I love Tokyo* T-shirts instead of standing in the shower, rivulets of water tracking down her bare skin.

...Fuck. He was so screwed.

\*\*\*

“Why are you sitting with a pillow in your lap like that?” asked El, stopping at the foot of the bed.

Mike’s mouth fell open as he took El in; the T-shirt meant for his dad was turning out to be a very, very short dress on El, and god, *those legs*—

“Why aren’t you wearing any pants?” squeaked Mike, thanking every higher power for giving him the sense to cover himself in advance.

“You didn’t give me any.” El eyed him suspiciously. “You didn’t do that on *purpose*, did you?”

“Of course not!” Mike retorted hotly. “I don’t sleep with pants on, so I didn’t pack any.”

“...Oh god.”

“I keep the *underwear* on!” Mike frantically amended. “I don’t go commando; what if there’s lice!”

“Ew, Mike.” El held up a hand. “I’ve heard enough.” She backtracked into the bathroom. “Gonna put a bathrobe on over this thing because *slutty* really isn’t my style, even if I do love Tokyo.”

Mike sighed in relief. “Hey, how’s your headache?”

“Gone, no thanks to you.”

*Nothing like a shower and painkillers can’t fix,* thought Mike

approvingly, recalling El's words.

El emerged from the bathroom again, this time sporting an over-the-knee bathrobe on top of the T-shirt. Mike flushed as he recognised the emotion coursing through him to be disappointment; he'd really liked seeing her legs...

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Is it cool if I call the front desk to bring up one of those foldable beds? They might charge you extra for it, but I'll pay."

The disappointment resurfaced; but it was for the best, and it was the most adult thing to take place in the last 20 minutes of Mike's life, thank god.

"I'll take care of it. Maybe order some room service while I'm at it. Do you want anything?"

"Not at the moment. I threw up just now, remember?"

"Right," said Mike agreeably, before reaching for the phone and making the calls. When he got off the line, he found El sitting in the chair staring out of the window, sipping her now-cold roasted green tea.

Mike watched her, tracing her profile with his gaze. It'd been an evening of revelations, yet the question still remained: was she or was she not Eleven?

"El," Mike found himself saying, "even if you're Eleven, you're still you, you know."

Time seemed to stop with the way El was looking at him; all affection and gratitude and even—dare he think it?—love.

"Mike." El put down her cup, suddenly serious. "I want to know who Eleven was." She folded her fingers together and hunched forwards, setting her mouth in a determined line as she looked Mike squarely in the eye.



“I think I should visit Hawkins.”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Guys, first of all, thank you for all the love. I do see your comments, they really make my day. Many of you have written what you liked, left me mini-essays, made me laugh with capslock--seriously, I love you. Thank you. These thoughtful comments really encourage me so much. I read them again and again because writing is a very solitary sport, it takes a lot of stamina and brainpower. There's no one else in this world who can finish this task of writing this fic, and that's such a privilege, but it means I have to do it without any help.

I know several of you are impatient, and I really do feel very sorry that I'm not updating fast enough, which is actually weird because I'm not on a schedule and you're not my boss and I'm not being paid for any of this lol. There is no deadline, I shouldn't feel pressured. But I am! In the best way! I haven't felt so motivated about a story in the longest time! And it's thanks to all of you :)

Unfortunately, I really can't make the words come any faster. I start out writing for myself, yes, but when you guys show up and leave me lovely words, I have greater purpose. It lends meaning to my writing when my readers feel entertained. I want you to enjoy these things I've dreamt up, and for that to happen I really need to make sure I don't screw up on the imagery, or the word choice, or the rhythm. Things like that. And, the plot lines in these last few updates are so intricate that I really can't afford to make any mistakes in continuity. Seriously, that's the scariest thing right now.

Guys, you know I try hard at this writing thing. I totally welcome 'please update soon' comments, but I need you to trust me--I'm not slacking off. I'm

working on this fic even on days when I'm sick in bed, which has, unfortunately, been happening often since December 2016. I'm a real person on the other side of the internet writing a story the size of five or six university-level theses on top of doing all the real life adulting. But rest assured I'm trying to beat the Halloween clock--because we all know once Season 2 drops, this story will be very strange to visit.

Two more updates before we're done! Hang in there! And thank you!

## 16. El - All these vicissitudes

El

It would be so easy, El thought, to crawl over to Mike's bed and let lust take over from there, but El wasn't going to do that because *he was the client*. Sure, there was little meaning in retaining professionalism from the moment she'd agreed to the sleepover, but arguably, she'd been treading the thin line since two days ago, when she'd let Mike sit at her table at the *katsudon* restaurant, and she'd managed perfectly well during the two days.

El was a creature of caution, often making up policies for herself to make sure she never let impulse take over; and so far, they'd been enforced. She had safety measures in place to circumvent situations that could compromise her values, like never carrying a condom out with her until the fifth date. It made perfect sense: she was so afraid of getting pregnant that, if she didn't have a condom with her, she'd never be inclined to have sex with anyone.

Foolproof.

But lying less than three feet away was a man that was making her want to throw all that sensibility out the window. And he wasn't wearing pants.

El flung her arm across her eyes, sighing into the darkness.

It wasn't just the physical attraction. El knew what falling for someone felt like, and Mike amplified that magnificent emotion. He had an irrepressible pull; his very existence a black hole of love and concern that she didn't mind being sucked into. She'd thought she could fight it, but after Mike opened up to her about Eleven, she wasn't so sure anymore.

Especially when he'd offered to go to Hawkins with her. He didn't have to, but he did anyway, and he seemed genuine. He really wanted to be there for her, she could tell—he'd phoned Boston, where his next business engagement was, and told them straight up he'd be a few days late. El felt bad that his work schedule was being

compromised, but she was also comforted that she wasn't going to be alone in this journey to a potential past.

Mike's commitment to his support of El had forged between them a connection, an infallible trust; perhaps it was something more intimate than romance and sex could offer.

Still, it didn't stop El from desiring that intimacy. A part of her wished Mike would make a move; but El could tell he wouldn't. It wasn't because he was a coward; it was because she wasn't being honest with him.

Despite everything Mike was doing for her, El was holding back, and she knew that Mike knew it too. Her platonic touches; her emphasis on the word 'friends', on the word 'client'; her one-of-the-guys, brazen walk out of the bathroom with just that T-shirt on; her calculated modesty with covering her legs when she caught him staring.

Mike wasn't the coward—El was.

She knew Mike respected her, and wouldn't try anything until he saw a sign that communicated an all-clear. But El wasn't yet able to show him that sign. She thought she'd known why: she was building a career, they were living in different countries, Mike was nomadic, his heart belonged to someone else.

Except now, that someone else could be her.

Did she want it to be her?

Did she want to *be* her?

Did she want to *have been* Eleven?

El didn't know the answers to all these questions, but she knew that if she wanted anything with Mike, she'd have to be explicit about how she felt about him.

The thought terrified her.

Junko eyed El, jutting out her lower lip as she squinted. "Something about you seems weird," she said, drumming her fingers against one of her folded arms, "what is it?"

"I have no idea." El slid the leave application form across Junko's desk to her.

"Oliver, commence analysis," commanded Junko, tipping her head towards El. The intern was slotting inserts into brochures, and his fingers halted over the glossy paper as he dragged his eyes up and down El's mien, appraising it.

El slowly crossed her arms over her chest and backed away.

"She's wearing yesterday's outfit," was the pronounced verdict, and El couldn't help but be impressed. Oliver the Intern was observant and had a good memory; maybe she should put in a good word for him with the bosses if he chose to stay on at GoWise.

"Ah, you're right, Oliver." Junko gave a goofy, open-mouthed smile. "Yesterday's suit!"

"Junko, here," El tapped the sheets of paper in front of Junko to remind her of her task, "I need this processed now."

"Did you spend the night outside?" demanded Junko.

"What? No."

Junko broke into a crafty grin; Oliver's was more discreet. Junko looked down at the paperwork before glancing at her computer screen. "It's okay, El. I understand."

"What do you understand?" asked El, not sure if she wanted to know the answer.

"You're eloping with your client."

"*Huh?*"

Junko gestured to the computer screen. "Travel agency called earlier. Said your client missed his flight last evening and rescheduled. They know we have to keep all itinerary changes on record, so they sent over his new flight details, which match yours. And I thought you said you had tons of paperwork to do during the lull?"

"Something cropped up. The client and I, we, uh... We happen to have stuff going on in the same place, so."

"So this is about your client!" cackled Junko.

El's face burned. "Just process the thing, will you?"

"I'm just teasing, El, don't get upset."

"I'm not," said El, even though she was.

"So you did spend the night with him?"

"Not really. Look, I'm not comfortable talking about it."

Junko leant across the tabletop, peering up at El's face. "I'm just happy for you, okay? It's been so long since you-know-who."

"Who?" asked El, her brows drawing together.

*Adrian*, mouthed Junko.

"You know about Adrian and me?" El was stunned.

"Workplace romances never go unnoticed by The Junko," drawled Oliver, "especially ones that come to an end." Oliver cocked his head and offered a look of sympathy. "I'm sorry he had to go to Tahiti, El."

"Wait, *Oliver* knows too? He wasn't even here when it happened!"

"What do you think Oliver and I talk about when we're stuck with each other all day folding brochures?"

Oliver nodded sagely. "Gossip is the balm to our monotony. Even two-year-old gossip."

"Okay, whatever," El raised her hands in surrender, "just as long as

you get your facts right. I'm over Adrian, and there's nothing between me and Mike Wheeler."

"Not yet," said Oliver knowingly, agreeing with the voice in El's head.

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They were riding the Keisei Skyliner, another airport train—Mike was back to being rail aficionado extraordinaire and had taken what seemed like 60 pictures of the Skyliner as it rolled up into the platform. It'd been adorable.

The train shot into a tunnel, turning the windows into black glass; El caught Mike quickly shifting his gaze away from her reflection. Cradling her chin in her hand, El hid a smile in her palm, pretending not to notice. Before long Mike was looking again.

It was moments like these that helped her forget her hypocrisy, just the two of them in that space and time; and El could just immerse herself in the delight that was Mike, let his company numb her guilt until she was alone with her thoughts again.

"Deja vu, Mike. Deja vu," El murmured against the tips of her fingers, as Mike owned a sheepish grin.

"It's just—I didn't know you wore glasses."

El laughed. "Lots of people wear glasses, Mike."

"I don't know, it's just so *new*." He paused. "You weren't wearing them last night."

"I had contacts on."

"Don't people who wear contacts change into their glasses before bed or something?"

"I didn't bring my glasses out. I did have my lens case and cleaning solution with me, though—it's a GoWise thing; company culture, if you will. We never know when we have to pull all-nighters, what

with our clients and parties and mingling and all that. Most of us are very prepared.” El drummed her fingers in her lap. “Also, I actually have night myopia?”

Mike looked intrigued. “What’s that?”

“You’ve never heard of it?”

Mike shrugged. “Fascinate me.”

El refolded her coat in her lap as she answered: “Well, it means I can’t see very well in low light.”

“Oh, like night blindness?”

“It’s not exactly night blindness—night blindness can be caused by a number of reasons, like diabetes or vitamin deficiency, which I don’t have. Mine is entirely... mutinous retinas.”

“*Mutinous retinas.*” Mike chortled. “So your vision gets blurry at night?”

“Without my glasses or contacts, yes.”

“I see.” Mike was studying her unabashedly now, and El thought she quite enjoyed the attention. “And you’re wearing glasses now, in the daytime, because...?”

“I don’t like to wear contacts when I fly, and we’ll be on that plane at night. What if I wake up in the middle of the night wanting to pee? I wouldn’t be able to find my seat when I come back.”

“Ah.” Mike smiled. “I dunno, but this makes me realise there is still so much I don’t know about you.”

“You have the entire fourteen-hour flight to make my acquaintance,” promised El, before looking at Mike curiously. “Do you wear glasses?”

“Nope.”

“So you have perfect eyesight?”



“Not really, but close. I’ve never needed glasses in my life. No mean feat, considering all that time looking at computer screens in college.”

There was a beat, then El plucked the glasses off her face and put them on Mike. They laughed as Mike adjusted them on his nose before turning to the window to check out his reflection, and El leant past him to squint at the glass, trying to make out his face.

“Exquisite,” they both said at the same time, and their eyes widened as they cracked up, not believing that they actually chose the same uncommon adjective to describe Mike’s bespectacled appearance. The mutuality and the happenstance made El’s insides squirm in delight.

It took a while before El realised how close they were to each other: their faces were mere inches apart, with El pressed up against Mike’s arm. Suddenly self-conscious, El sprang back; she bounced against the seat in sorry comicality, high spirits abandoned.

She didn’t dare look at Mike and instead chose to quell the battering of her heart on her ribcage, an inner voice chanting loudly and mockingly, in time with the beats, that she was being a big, fat jerk.

“Here,” said Mike after a while, feigned nonchalance in his voice as he dropped the spectacles on top of the coat in El’s lap.

“Thanks,” said El, tone wavering, as she put her glasses on again. She wondered how to tell him that she needed time, that she wasn’t being a jerk on purpose, that she was just irrationally afraid to take that step forward because change often seemed to her like a ridiculous concept, and dealing with it always made her feel like she was drowning.

“El, you sure you’re okay to fly?” asked Mike, tactfully changing the subject. Social lifesaver, as always.

“I’m fine.”

“But what if the altitude messes with your head? The difference in pressure and everything? And you’d be exposed to so much radiation; we should totally find out if there’s a relation between radiation and

headaches—”

“Mike, a month after brain surgery I flew to get home to Pittsburgh—I’m pretty sure whatever it is I have doesn’t affect my health on a plane.” El finally looked at Mike, testing out a smile, when she realised there was a deep line in Mike’s forehead.

“You went out of town to have surgery? Like, outside Pittsburgh?”

“Yup. Montauk.”

“Montauk?” Mike’s brows shot up. “That’s random. No good hospitals in Pittsburgh, huh?”

“Well, the subsequent follow-ups were done in Pittsburgh, when my doctor visited. The initial procedure required me to go to a specialist or something.” El paused. “I was told it’d been a very difficult tumour.”

“Huh.” Mike sounded sceptical.

“...What is it?”

“I dunno, a specialist in *Montauk* just strikes me as weird. It’s not known for being a medical hub. I mean, it’s the Hamptons,” said Mike, shaking his head and frowning. “Any idea what your condition was called? Was it cancer? Some genetic disorder?”

El searched her memory for the information and came up with nothing.

It was one of those things El never really wondered about because she just... never thought about it, in the roses-are-red kind of way. She’d been told about the procedure and how long she’d taken to recover, things like that—her mother had been quite detailed—but there never was a mention about what the condition was exactly. Perhaps it was precisely because Fern had told her everything else, that El assumed she didn’t need to know what it was called.

“My mom never told me,” El said eventually.

Mike held El’s gaze for a long moment. “You should speak with your

mom.”

El cast her eyes down to watch her fingers playing with the collar of her coat. Fern hadn’t answered her latest email. El really wanted to give her the benefit of the doubt, but the more she talked about it with Mike, the more El felt that Fern knew a lot more than what she’d let on.

“Yeah,” El looked up at Mike and took a deep breath, “you’re right, maybe I should. In person.”

“So I guess it’s Hawkins first, then Pittsburgh?”

El nodded before realising something was amiss. “Wait—you’re coming to Pittsburgh with me?”

“Of course I am.”

“No,” El had to protest, Mike was being ridiculous, “you have to *work*, you’re already missing days of that conference in Boston—”

El stopped talking when Mike placed his hand on her forearm, his gaze earnest, his lower lip protracting against his upper one; their corners lifted in a small, reassuring smile.

El sighed. She couldn’t win this.

Mike gave her arm a light squeeze. “I promised we’ll be in this together.”

Something tightened in El’s chest as she heard the words.

It would be so easy, El thought, to fall in love with him.

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Mike was so used to flying and so good at math that he had a plan all worked out by the time it came for them to board the plane, and it involved sleeping the moment they got to their seats even though it was four in the afternoon. The logic behind it was that it was 1 AM where they were going, and if they didn’t adjust themselves to

Eastern Time prior they'd lose a lot of daylight sleeping precious hours away. El only had four whole days before she returned to Japan; they needed that first day.

El knew she could fall asleep given how much of the night she'd spent tossing and turning, but she didn't feel like it yet. She looked over at Mike—he was facing her, lashes casting tiny shadows on his cheeks, lips slightly parted. She swept her gaze down, fixating on the rise and fall of his chest, and she wondered what it'd be like to feel it under her hand. Would she be able to sense his heartbeat; his warmth?

It was five in the evening, and El noted that in a few minutes she'd have known Mike for four whole days. She closed her eyes to call up the memory of the first time they met. It seemed like such a long time ago, the way he'd breathed her name, the way he'd asked...

El's eyes fluttered open as she remembered.

*You're not Eleven?*, had been the exact words.

El realised, with a resounding clarity, how horrible Mike must have felt when he saw her. She tried to imagine the disbelief, the shock, and the agony that rose with forbidden hope. Her heart ached for Mike, and in that moment El discovered how much she wanted to be Eleven for his sake.

Yet it was displacing and strange, because she didn't want *Eleven* to have him. El wanted Mike for herself; and she also wanted him as himself: as someone who loved her for her, not as Eleven.

But it wasn't an issue with Mike: he'd made it clear in the taxi the other night that he thought El to be her own person even though he'd had trouble separating her from Eleven, and surely that meant he liked her for who she was. He liked El *now*. No matter her past, no matter her worrying, sudden-headache spells.

No, it was an issue with *her*. There could've been better words to describe it, but El thought she was being selfish and controlling. She'd had the upper hand in the situation all along, taken the ball forcibly into her court with her deliberate distancing and bland

semantics. Mike had acquiesced, saint that he was, but El knew the time had come for the travesty to end. She was done being a coward.

She was going to love him back.

The ferocity of her resolve would've knocked her off her feet had she not been sitting—she felt her stomach bottoming out; then came sheer, utter relief, before it was replaced by exhilaration so powerful she had to press the back of her fingers to her lips to keep herself from laughing.

She was in love with Mike Wheeler. Eleven or not, *she*, this person that she was currently being, was in love with Mike Wheeler. It really was that simple.

El looked at Mike again, feeling all the fondness in the world for him, and a gripping enthusiasm for kissing him. If they'd been in Economy she would've just leant in; but they'd chosen to fly Business Class and there was a stupid partition she'd have to crawl over if she wanted to kiss him awake. She loved the guy, but she didn't want to be some cyprian of the air, not when there were 13 hours left on the flight.

El scooted as close to Mike as she could, gingerly touching their fingers together on the armrest. She faced him; wished she could go even closer, now that she'd finally found the nerve; and closed her eyes to surrender to sleep, hoping to wake up with the same strength of resolve.

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*The list was 23-names-long, from Adelaide to Yvonne.*

*She had to pick one even though she had one already: Eleven, El for short. Maybe that meant she had two?*

*She liked 'El' the best. Mike had given it to her, so she liked that the best.*

*But she couldn't keep it; she was getting something soon, something brand new called an 'identity'. That meant she needed a new name. She'd also get a birthday—Fern had told her she was born on the morning of September 5th. She knew what mothers and fathers and brothers and*

sisters were, but she never thought she'd been born to anyone. She thought she'd been different, but Fern said she came to the world like everybody else. That made her happy. It made her feel like she was normal, and she wasn't bad.

Because she knew she was bad. Because she wasn't safe for people. She'd hurt Lucas, after all. He'd forgiven her, but she had hurt him. And Dustin had said she'd kill those boys who'd tried to hurt Mike—she believed it. She'd killed those people with the guns. She was capable of it.

She was worse now, because she had friends. If bad people tried to hurt them, she would hurt the bad people first. She knew it. It was the best and quickest way to keep her friends safe. She didn't know the other ways. That's why she was bad, maybe as bad as the bad people.

So maybe it was good that Fern was also going to make her safe for all people, even the bad ones. Maybe she could learn the other ways to keep her friends safe.

But they told her making her safe meant she would forget. Was that good? Maybe. She didn't like to think about how bad she was.

Or maybe not. She didn't want to forget Mike. She didn't want to forget Mike the most. She didn't want to forget Mike as much as she wanted to forget she was bad. This made her feel sad, because she wanted both.

But even if she forgot him, Mike would remember her.

Would he?

Perhaps if she kept her name...

She looked at the list again. None of the names looked like 'El'.

She shrugged and gave the list back to Fern. She didn't want to tell Fern she wanted the name Mike gave her. Fern had made the list, and she liked Fern. Fern was special. Fern was her mom. She didn't know a lot about moms, but she knew Mike liked his, and there was Joyce, who was also a mom, and she liked Joyce.

She understood the concept of a mom: they were people you wanted to trust, people who could solve great problems, people who took care of you,

*people who were pretty good cooks. Yet sometimes you couldn't tell moms everything—but you definitely were supposed to, and you might eventually tell them when the time was right.*

*This wasn't the right time to tell Fern she didn't want the names on the list. Fern was an important person to her. She didn't want Fern to think she didn't like the names.*

*And then Fern took out another name from her pocket and asked: "What do you think of 'Elodie'?"*

*She looked at the name. Fern said it had to do with her real mom.*

*She thought she was like her real mom, Anita. Bad, but maybe not completely. Fern said Anita had tried to be good, and trying meant everything. Anita had gone to a place called 'rehab' right before she gave birth to her; it meant she'd tried to quit drugs. Fern said it was a big deal because that was the longest time Anita had stopped taking drugs, and it'd been for someone other than herself.*

*She understood that. She thought she was the same. Like how she'd known where Will was, but she hadn't told, because she didn't want to go back to the Bad Place. She didn't want to go to the upside-down world where the monster lived, too. She thought that if she told anyone, they'd put her back in the Bad Place. She didn't want that, so she'd have to run away to the Upside Down; since Papa couldn't go there, it was safer than the Bad Place.*

*Until she met Mike, who showed her what home was. She felt so safe with Mike, and she wanted to be good for him. And then she met her friends, and she wanted to be good for them too. So she told them where Will was.*

*She looked at the name again. Elodie. She wondered if it was 'El' for short. Fern said it was.*

*Then this was the one she wanted, because it reminded her of Mike and her friends, and of trying to be good for them, and how she wanted to find another way to keep them safe.*

*She'd still be El, but better.*

*She'd be good.*

## 17. Fern - This love you suffer

### Notes for the Chapter:

Let me warn you: this chapter is over 18 000 words long. Have fun, and now you get why you had to wait, don't you.

### Fern - 1984

There was the medical team, led by Shawn; the psychiatrist; the scientists working on the serum; the brood of investigators unearthing the mysteries of Hawkins Laboratory; and of course, the Duffers. It really took a village.

“Is it weird for you? Being around all these grownups in lab coats?” asked Fern, sitting beside El on her bed. It was their fifth night at the Montauk facility.

El’s lips puckered as she thought.

“Are Matt and Ross grownups?” was El’s response.

“You have a point.” Fern laughed, then her expression turned serious. “Tomorrow they’ll be asking you some questions about what happened in Hawkins, and they want you to know it’s okay if you decide you can’t talk about it. We could always try another day. No pressure, you understand?”

El gave her trademark smile—the wry, lopsided one that was more pronounced in her cheek—something Fern was getting more and more familiar with. It was a barely-there gesture that spoke volumes, one El used to assure Fern that she was okay.

Fern drew El closer to kiss her on the forehead. “You’re very brave, Elliebean.”

El hadn’t even told Fern the details of her time at the lab; it made Fern wonder how she was going to tell the Duffers and the psychiatrist. But perhaps it was just that; perhaps El needed her kindred strangers as well.



"I get this feeling that you've grown up quite a lot since we got here," Fern said, rubbing El's arm affectionately. "I don't know; it's not like you were childish to begin with, it's just... You're different now."

A crease appeared in El's brow. "Different... bad?"

"No, different-good. You aren't as wary as you were before. I mean, you're still careful, but everyone's not a - a *threat* now, I think. And that's good, because the world at large is full of people who want to help you more than harm you." Fern studied El's expression. "I know it's something you've had to accept rather than learn; but that's what I believe anyway."

It took a second, but El finally nodded to show she understood.

Fern threw an arm around El's shoulders and tilted her head so it bumped against El's, wishing that the universe be kinder to this child from now on, because she'd had enough grief to last a lifetime.

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"Elodie—"

"El," El quietly corrected the nurse, making Fern look at her curiously.

The nurse stared at El blankly for a moment.

"I think she means she prefers to go by 'El'," said Fern, filling in the blanks for the nurse.

"Oh, all right, I see," the nurse broke out into a smile of relief, looking down at her clipboard, "El, we're going to give you a physical, so we'll be doing things like weighing you and seeing how tall you are, how good your hearing is, all of that; and the only painful thing is at the end, where we stick a needle in your arm to take some blood."

El flinched at this, making Fern ask if she wanted Fern to be with her. El shook her head and braced herself before following the nurse into the room behind the curtain.

Later, after the nurse declared the blood sample satisfactory, they exited the clinic to head to lunch, and Fern decided to casually mention:

“I’ve noticed you’re very attached to the name ‘El’.”

El’s head snapped up and she met Fern’s eyes, obviously nervous.

“Don’t get me wrong,” said Fern, “it’s perfectly fine. I’m just wondering why, that’s all.”

El looked away, fixing her eyes on the floor as they walked. Fern couldn’t help but notice the pinking in El’s face. This was new.

El finally met Fern’s gaze. “It’s nothing,” she said before looking askance, as if she was afraid of giving herself away.

Fern shrugged. “Okay.” She tried to decipher the emotion in El’s voice. It sounded a lot like embarrassment, and El was acting quite shy. What was this about?

Fern couldn’t make head nor tail of it, but she stored it carefully away in her memory. Maybe she’d find out someday.

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El wasn’t the only one who had to get interviewed by the people at DARPA’s lab; Fern had her share of it as well, most of it about El’s time with her from the day they met until El started living in Pittsburgh.

Today Fern’s interview was with the primary investigator, Dr Tan (it rhymed with ‘ton’; she was Chinese), whom she found unbearably attractive with her glacial smile and unhurried demeanour. (Fern had a type, she couldn’t help it.) And it made her inordinately nervous, especially since she and Dr Tan were the only ones in the room and the doctor was a pretty famous behaviourist—she could probably pick up how hard Fern was crushing on her in mere seconds.

The fancies immediately faded when the doctor informed her that their conversation would be about Anita and everything would be

recorded; Dr Tan then pressed the red button on a tape deck and launched into her first query.

“In earlier statements, you mentioned that you shared a romantic relationship and were living with Elodie’s mother before she was born, so we would like you to tell us more about her,” Dr Tan looked down at her clipboard, “just so we can understand if any of Elodie’s preternatural tendencies are hereditary.”

Fern gave Dr Tan a tight smile. She knew Dr Tan’s statement concealed the one about how they were trying to understand El as a weapon, to figure out her origins and determine how dangerous she was.

“Sure. Shoot.”

“Did Elodie’s mother—Anita—exhibit any powers similar to Elodie’s when she was with you?”

“Not at home,” said Fern. “She wasn’t explicit with her experiences in the experiment, and I didn’t ask because I - well, I didn’t like to think that the place that paid my salary was the same institution that enabled her drug addiction.”

Bobbing her head in assent, Dr Tan made some notes on her clipboard. “Records from Project MKUltra show that Anita was capable of certain feats while in the isolation tank. Did you know about this?”

“Yes. I haven’t personally read the file, but the Duffers did tell me about it when they first got their hands on the information.”

“There was video footage from the experiment,” the doctor paused as Fern expressed her surprise, “which showed Anita manifesting some rather violent tendencies. Was she ever...”

Fern caught on to Dr Tan’s hesitation. “No, she never hurt anyone.”

“She broke the bones of quite a few people who tried to get her out of the tank.” Dr Tan looked at Fern for a brief second. “Without touching them. She’d forget what happened when they got her out there, though. It was as if she accomplished everything while in a

trance.”

“Oh.” Fern hadn’t known; she’d never found the courage to look at any of Anita’s files.

“Anita was quite formidable,” continued Dr Tan, “and Brenner had a lot of hopes for her and her baby. He used the words ‘special’ and ‘gifted’ to describe her. It appeared, however, that a lot of Anita’s abilities were fuelled by rage.”

It made Fern extremely uncomfortable to hear all this new stories about Anita, related in Dr Tan’s antiseptic alto. Still, Fern was obliged to assist in DARPA’s investigations; she couldn’t just run away from this session.

“We have reason to believe that Elodie shares similar traits,” said Dr Tan. “We’ve already established that the origin of her powers lies with her mother, but we’re still trying to decipher why and how that happened.”

Fern frowned at this. “El isn’t an angry child, if that’s what you’re trying to say. She’s anxious, sometimes, but she isn’t prone to fits of rage. Neither was Anita, at least not in her daily life.”

“I understand: Anita was a different person in the isolation tank.” Dr Tan lifted a sheet of paper off the clipboard as they lapsed into silence.

Fern took Dr Tan’s words in, remembering the day she found Anita in the bathtub.

“I don’t know if this is of any significance,” began Fern, “but Anita would put herself in the bathtub at home and submerge herself, trying to imitate the experiment? She said it was the only time she felt safe, but it was terrifying because if anything happened to her, she’d have endangered the baby as well.”

Dr Tan was looking interested now. “So she saw the tank as some sort of therapy?”

“I think so, yes.”

"I can sort of see how that makes sense, since its entire point was sensory deprivation." Dr Tan studied her notes before peering up at Fern. "What else do you remember about these episodes?"

Fern felt her stomach lurch as the memories came back.

"She said that in her head there was a box—no, wait, it was a chest, I think? And in it, she locked up all the negative emotions that she had, and she felt safe because she was in control." Fern looked at Dr Tan, shaking her head. "She called herself a monster."

"A monster?"

"Yes. She dealt with a lot of self-loathing. She was hopelessly addicted to drugs, and even after she got pregnant she couldn't quit. She probably thought she was a horrible person for ignoring the well-being of her baby."

Dr Tan continued probing into Anita's story about the chest of bad feelings, and Fern told her everything she knew. The interview had gone on for close to an hour before they stopped, and Dr Tan thanked Fern before showing her to the door.

"The team is going to have a meeting after this, to put all the pieces of the puzzle together and see how they fit with each other, and how it relates to Elodie," said Dr Tan. "We really appreciate your assistance."

"Of course," said Fern, managing a smile, a genuine one now that the session was over and she could put herself in perspective, reminding herself that no matter what, DARPA was on her side, and had El's best interests at heart.

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"Fern," Matt Duffer poked his head past the doorjamb, "you done?"

It was six in the evening and Fern was finishing up a meeting with the other pharmaceutical scientists. She took one look at Matt (Ross had joined him, widening the opening in the door), pitched a final suggestion to the team, before grabbing her things and heading out of

the lab.

“Hey,” said Fern, giving the Duffers a friendly smile, “how was your day with my girl?”

Because they were now friends with El and also the chief researchers on the project, Matt and Ross had been the first choice of company for El, sticking with her for most of the day. They'd interviewed her themselves, sat through tests with her and stayed in the room through her session with the psychiatrist. Of course, all of it had been work for them as well.

“Come on, we'll brief you in here,” said Ross, leading Fern to the brothers' shared office.

Fern sat herself in the armchair Matt was pointing out to her. “Do I need a drink for this?”

“It's not all horrific secrets, but we do have some tequila in the cupboard.”

Ross laughed at his brother's quip before turning to Fern. “Okay, first off—you know how we pilfered all that information from Hawkins Lab?”

“The stuff on the computer? El's files and all that?”

“Yup.” There was a wicked glint in Ross's eye. “Funny story: Brenner's people thought they had it covered, digitising all their data. I guess it's because you can't actually see digitised data, so they thought evidence could be solidly protected or easily erased.”

“But nothing really gets erased,” Matt picked up the conversation, “which is something they overlooked—makes sense, given how digital technology is still holding mysteries for even the best of us. Point is, they made all their records digital, destroyed the hard copies, and kept the information locked on their computers.”

Fern wondered why they were unloading all this on her, but before she could ask, Ross started talking again.

“You know we're good friends with the guys who developed the

Internet protocol suite? We borrowed their tech to try and tap into the Hawkins Lab data network. It worked.”

“It shouldn’t have surprised us,” Matt added, “since technically CIA and DARPA all work for the Pentagon, at the end of the day.”

“In the week that followed the fiasco at Hawkins Middle,” said Ross, chiming in, “the CIA lowered the security levels on the lab’s network to conduct their own investigation. That’s when we sent in our trojan horse.”

“Trojan horse?”

“Dom helped us plant it.” Matt was smiling fondly at the memory. “It looks like any other lab gadget, but it’s hooked up to their system, and even after the walls were put up again it sent us—in fact it’s still sending us—all their dirty little secrets.”

“So just last week, we sort of went swimming in one of the corners of the network and got our hands on the video footage and exit-entry logs of that night in November, when El escaped from the lab.”

Fern was listening now.

“That first guy who disappeared,” Matt squeezed his eyes shut and started tapping the air with a finger, “what was his name again?”

“Von Braun?”

“Yes,” Matt snapped his fingers, “Von Braun. We found out he was locking up that night.”

“According to Dom, to lock up the main building, one would have to scan a keycard on every floor and lock them floor by floor. All of them need to be locked within a certain timeframe; if they aren’t, the main security system would sound an alarm.”

“That night, Von Braun had started locking up, but at some point he disappeared after getting into an elevator. The camera had caught images of the monster appearing to Von Braun earlier, after which he ran, and even though we didn’t actually see it happen, we can deduce he was killed by the monster after he entered the elevator.”

“Minutes later, the alarm started sounding, because he hadn’t finished swiping his card on all the floors. El was awoken by the alarm, according to the footage, which also showed her leaving her room and up a vent.”

“And today, with El’s help,” Ross’s voice was low now, and he came very close to Fern, perching on the ottoman, “we’ve finally confirmed how she escaped.”

Fern’s eyes widened. “She actually told you guys?”

“Well, sort of. You know El. Woman of few words.”

“We showed her footage of the corridors and she pointed where she went. Also we did a lot of guessing aloud, and she answered ‘yes’ and ‘no’. We managed to work it out with our combined intellects and other captures of El, like the one of her emerging from the pipe outside of the compound.”

“It also helped that you and Dom figured out she had some kind of biological relationship with it. We asked her why she went into the vent, and she didn’t want to say at first, until we had this wild thought: what if the monster had stayed in the vents after killing Von Braun, and had influenced her choice to escape the lab?”

“We then asked if it was monster that led her out. She said yes, and left it there. We didn’t ask anymore because her heart rate went up at that point, and we didn’t want to push her further.”

Fern recalled the conclusion she and Dom had arrived at the night they went into the alternate universe to search for the monster. It hadn’t been able to stray far from El.

Fern froze as a thought possessed her.

“Guys,” she started slowly, “this is just a postulate, but do you think the monster is a - a reincarnation of Anita?”

“What, her mother?”

“It makes sense, doesn’t it? Anita had called herself a monster, and if she’d been the one to lead El out of the lab, it would’ve meant that



she was *protecting* her baby...”

“Whoa, Fern. Hold up. What are you saying?”

So, like how she’d told Dr Tan earlier that day, Fern told them about Anita and the isolation tanks and what had gone on in Anita’s head.

The Duffers looked perplexed at the end of Fern’s narrative. Ross, especially, was frowning very hard.

“Fern, in the experiment records Brenner wrote down this statement from El herself: she had ‘touched the monster while dreaming in the bath’. The investigation team took that to mean the monster resided in her head, that it was a dormant part of her subconscious until she made contact with it. Why would Anita plant herself in El’s subconscious?”

“To be remembered?” Matt spoke up.

“But as a monster?” Ross sounded sceptical. “I don’t think so, right?”

Fern mulled on this. Ross had a point. “She did care for El in the end. You know, trying to clean up her act by going to rehab. And she was genuinely upset that her baby was taken away from her. I agree she wouldn’t want to be remembered as a monster, but if the monster was leading El to safety, it still supports the idea that it was trying to protect her.”

“Except safety is relative, and none of us can say that the outside was safer than the lab,” Ross pointed out, “and let’s not forget El had been terrified of the monster when she saw it in her head. She wouldn’t have trusted it so readily.”

“A thought,” Matt splayed his hands at his brother and Fern, “if the monster had these maternal instincts, and was really trying to protect El, why hadn’t it stuck with her all the way? Why had it left her open to threat in the woods? Why hadn’t it sought her when she was taken in by that boy? And since we’re thinking of it as having human feelings, why had it killed innocent people completely unconnected to El? Even if it’d been motivated by hunger, it should’ve fed on people who had actually harmed her. For revenge and all that.”

"I guess now the question is: what could the monster be," asked Ross, "bearing in mind that El actually destroyed it with her powers? I think the fact that El is alive means she wasn't dependent on the monster, even if they shared a biological connection."

"Also, she hasn't told us *how* she disappeared into the nether on the night she killed the monster," Matt added. "We know there's some physics involved with El, the monster and the dimension, but we won't know the whole story until El tells us."

They drank in the silence, contemplating for several minutes. Ross started drawing diagrams on a piece of paper, trying to map out the information on hand so he could fill in the gaps they were staring at. Matt, on the other hand, was staring at Ross.

"Another postulate," said Matt slowly. "*Parasitic twin*."

A beat.

"Am I allowed to be offended that you thought of that as you looked at me?" asked Ross.

"A little, yeah." Matt grinned.

"What do you mean, parasitic twin?" asked Fern, brows high.

"Like E.T.?" asked Ross. "And how its life was connected to Elliot's?"

Matt pointed at Ross approvingly, before shooting Fern an expectant look.

"Are you talking about a movie?" hazarded Fern.

"...Don't tell me you haven't watched 'E.T.!'"

"I haven't."

"No." Ross was aghast.

"Okay, before I call you out on that, let me explain," Matt resumed their discussion, "El wasn't dependent on the monster, but it was dependent on her, considering the proximity issue. What if it drew

some sort of life from her? But obviously it wasn't enough, because it had to feed. Maybe it got stronger and hence less dependent?"

"Not unbelievable; we'd have to hash this out with the team," said Ross.

"The chest," said Fern, mouth falling open in realisation. "What if it's not a reincarnation of Anita, but an incarnation of her demons? What if Anita gave birth to a matryoshka doll of sorts—" Fern tried out her own analogy, "—which contained El, and the monster in her head? And when El touched it, it burst forth and took form?"

"Oh, wow. This is starting to make a lot of sense in a really weird way."

The three of them exchanged apprehensive looks.

"Assuming this is true, how are we going to reconcile all this with El, and the monster, and the dimension?" asked Fern.

"We're missing some pieces. Pieces I think El has," said Matt.

All eyes were on Fern.

She sighed. "I'll try asking her what she knows about the monster."

The Duffers gave her an encouraging smile, and Ross put a hand on her shoulder. She looked up at him gratefully, and there was something in his eyes that looked a lot like pity. Sighing, he said:

"You poor thing, living under a rock."

"Huh?"

"I can't believe you haven't watched *E.T.*. Where were you last year?"

"Yeah, Fern. Even *El's* watched it."

"Okay to be fair, that was last week, and we sort of made her."

"But she enjoyed it! Did you know El's initials are 'E.T.', Fern?"

"And it only happened after *you* adopted her. From a mere prime

number to sharing E.T.'s initials! All because of you!"

"It's fate, Fern."

"Pure fate."

"It means you gotta watch the movie, Fern."

"Yeah, Fern."

Fern groaned. These kids.

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El was a brooder, and that worried Fern. She tried to convince herself that El was just esoteric, that it was just puberty, but it was scary to have lived with Anita and see her daughter behave like her. The manifestations weren't exactly the same—Anita's personality had taken a one-eighty while El's didn't—but they both seemed tortured, with their abstracted fixations and troubled reveries.

"Baby?" Fern knocked on the already-open door, finally revealing her presence to El.

El turned away from the mirror on the vanity to look at Fern, lips parted in surprise.

"Penny for your thoughts?" asked Fern, giving El what she hoped was an encouraging smile.

The idiom wasn't in El's vocabulary, judging from the squint in her eyes, and Fern chose to rephrase.

"What are you thinking about?"

El's breathing seemed more laboured than usual as she gave an abstemious shake of her head.

Fern thought she'd made a lot of headway with El the past four months. Despite El's preference for non-verbal communication, she seemed to be comfortable talking to Fern. She asked questions and

vocalised observations, and they could have actual exchanges without much prompting from Fern.

Ever since they came to Montauk, El seemed to be less inclined to do all that. Perhaps it was just the lack of time—they only saw each other in the mornings and evenings at the facility—or maybe it was just El being overwhelmed by yet another foreign environment.

Fern crossed the room and lowered herself on the bed. “Joyce and Will are coming tomorrow,” said Fern, trying to bring up a topic she thought might interest El. “Are you looking forward to meeting them?”

El swivelled in her seat to face Fern, bumping knees with her. She shrugged, shoulders hunching.

Fern recalled the meeting she’d had with the Duffers earlier. She wondered if this was a good time to bring up the night of El’s escape from Hawkins Lab.

El blinked up at Fern. “What’s wrong with Will?”

It was an unexpected question, but Fern was just glad El had initiated conversation.

“I thought you knew,” said Fern. “That day when Joyce called me, weren’t you listening?”

“I listened a little. I had to cook eggs.”

“Yes,” Fern laughed, remembering, “the eggs were burning. Still tasted good, though.” She drummed a rhythm on El’s knees with the tips of her forefingers, making El smile.

Fern claimed the moment for herself, admiring El’s entire existence, a deep gratitude in her heart for being able to have her, for the reunion she wished Anita could’ve been present for. As she felt these things, Fern finally realised that this was probably the love that drove Anita to seek help in her final term of pregnancy, the love that possessed Joyce to search for Will even when the world believed him dead.

Since she assumed the role of El’s mother, Fern had always wondered

whether she would love differently if El had actually been her biological daughter. She knew she felt love for El, but she always had a feeling she could love even more. It puzzled Fern; it was almost as if she'd loved El more when they hadn't met, when El had just been the foetus in Anita's womb, when El had been locked up in Hawkins Lab and Fern spent most wakeful hours wondering if she was okay.

Suddenly, Fern understood why. For the longest time, El had just been 'Anita's kid'. Fern had loved El *because of* Anita. But now... Now that El was actually in Fern's life as an actual person, the way Fern was loving El was evolving.

In that revelatory moment, Fern realised El was her everything.

Fern was surprised the feeling didn't engulf her senses, didn't make her heart ache with all the love in the world—instead it took the form of warm, light step into the realm of absolute certainty that she would do anything for El, even die for her.

In El, Fern saw an innocence lost and an innocence given—what Brenner had taken away, Fern had started to rebuild. El was granting her the privilege to do that, and Fern didn't want to betray that sentiment. So even though Fern had the responsibility to find out as much as she could from El to assist with DARPA's investigations, she knew that above all she was a mother now: sentinel and shield, solace and succour. Using these moments to get information out of El would cheapen them to subterfuge, and neither El nor Fern was deserving of that.

There was anticipation in El's gaze, and Fern remembered she had yet to answer El's question.

"Right, Will—during his time in the other world, Will contracted something. At least, that's what Joyce thinks. He's throwing up weird things and experiencing hallucinations of the other side. Stayed in there too long, maybe. He's coming here to get better."

The colour drained from El's face.

Fern drew back to look at El. "You okay, honey?"

El's chin started to tremble, then her face crumpled as she accepted Fern's hug.

"What is it, baby?"

"It's my fault," uttered El, scant of breath, clutching at Fern's arm.

"Nothing's your fault." Fern was bewildered. El wasn't blaming Will's condition on herself, was she?

"No," said El, more forcefully this time, wrenching herself out of Fern's embrace to look at her, face wet. "It's my fault Will was in the Upside Down."

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It was midnight when El finally fell asleep, every breath she emitted a quaver that mimicked her earlier sobs. Fern gently let go of her, retracting her arms from around her body and sliding off the bed.

Fern's bed was diagonally opposite El's on the other side of the room, and she considered pulling it over to El's to join them up; not wanting to wake El, however, Fern lifted a nearby armchair and quietly parked it beside El's bed instead. She grabbed her afghan and threw it over her shoulders, settling into the plush.

El hadn't been specific about how Will being in the nether was her fault—though Fern suspected it had to do with her not understanding the science behind it rather than her being unwilling to reveal the truth. All El had said was that she'd been in the other world, and she'd had a view of the outside—and she'd witnessed the monster going for Will. She'd tried to stop it by dragging it into the world she'd been in—because she knew it wouldn't hurt her—but the next moment found her back into the real world, alone. She hadn't realised Will had become trapped on the other side until she saw his picture in Mike Wheeler's room, and that's when she figured out she'd messed up and let the monster get to Will.

Fern was baffled: how had El known the monster wouldn't have hurt her? El seemed to think that it was the monster that had abducted Will from the real world into the nether, but was that even possible?

Had Will's disappearance really been because of her failure to stop the monster?

And how had she even ended up in the other dimension in the first place?

There had to be something that ran deeper than all this. Fern knew it, but she couldn't place her finger on it. El wasn't just disturbed about Will getting stuck in the nether; she'd had the past six months to suffer a breakdown over it, and getting disturbed only now seemed unnatural. There had to be something else.

Fern wasn't inclined to excavate the details, not when El was so overwrought. Their time together had been short, but comparatively longer and more intimate than El's past relationships with anyone who hadn't been Brenner; Fern had never seen El like that before, and it shackled Fern in fear. She understood that these extreme emotions came along with being one of El's most trusted humans, but it was a lot of sudden pressure to cope with.

Fern stood up from the armchair, exhaling heavily as she reached a decision: she was going to get to the bottom of this. She wouldn't allow her baby girl to be tormented by an assumption; El's guilt wasn't justified, and as long as a day went by that the mystery of Will's disappearance was left unravelled, El would blame herself for everything that befell Will in the nether, and everything that came after.

Fern wasn't going to let that happen.

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A car pulled up into the driveway, and Fern straightened up against the pillar she was leaning on in the lobby, craning her neck to see if it transported the Byerses.

The passenger side door swung open and Joyce emerged. Fern was about to wave and call out, but her hand withered as she saw Joyce's face, freighted with anxiety and pinched with the lack of sleep. She looked exactly like how she had the night they found Will.



Will was looking fine, if not pallid; he shouldered a backpack and gave Fern a little wave when he spotted her. It was good to know that Will was, ostensibly, untroubled about the state of his health.

Joyce trudged up to where Fern was, wearing a tired smile. "I need a cigarette," muttered Joyce as they came face to face, and Fern pulled Joyce into a hug.

"Long drive from La Guardia, huh?" said Fern sympathetically, leaning back and smoothing out Joyce's sleeves.

"Montauk's just so far out." Joyce turned to check that Will was following her and, putting an arm across his shoulders, walked into the building, Fern leading the way.

"Hello, Miss Thayer," greeted Will.

"Hi, Will. Good to see you again. Come on, I'll show you to your room."

Will was about to respond when he started coughing, alarming Joyce.

"Where's the bathroom?" asked Joyce, and Fern pointed it out. Will half-ran towards it, leaving Fern and Joyce alone in the middle of the lobby.

Joyce stared after him for a moment before turning to Fern and offering her a terse smile. "This... It's been happening a lot. He tried to hide it, but how long did he think he could hide a cough like that, I have no idea. He's also having these - these *visions*, flashbacks of the Other Side—I think it was just too traumatic for him."

Fern could only squeeze Joyce's arm in consolation. "It sucks to have a sick kid."

Joyce chewed on her lip, her features drawing together. "I - I haven't told Will that Eleven's here. His friends have told him all about her; I didn't want him to know where she was and have to keep it from them."

"I understand." Guilt started creeping around in Fern's gut, catching her by surprise. Was she actually keen to have an excuse to keep El

and Will apart? Was she afraid that El would turn out responsible for Will having been in the nether?

No, Fern fought her impulses, *El has nothing to hide.*

“We’ll be housed on the same floor,” said Fern, “it’d be hard for them to not bump into each other. And really, they’re the only two kids in the entire building, so.”

Joyce nodded. “We’ll just take it as it comes.”

“The scientists might have other ideas about them meeting,” Fern pointed out, “since both of them are connected to the case.”

Will returned from the bathroom then, cueing Fern and Joyce to start talking about how good the food was at the facility. Will was braving a smile and chiming in about how he was excited to be in New York, but all Fern noticed was the apprehension marring his countenance; she found herself praying that El wouldn’t be the cause of it.

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The medical team started running tests on Will that very afternoon; El had spent the morning with the Duffers, and was free to roam the rest of the day. She chose to stick with Fern, who decided to take her out for a breather. There was a lighthouse right on the tip of island that was open to the public, and since it was of historical importance Fern thought it’d be educational for El to see it.

Fern didn’t have a car in Montauk, so they took a taxi; it was El’s first time in one, and Fern took the opportunity to explain how the vehicle-for-hire system worked. Fern had known soon after they’d met that El liked learning things, and she was a child that never let big words or foreign concepts daunt her.

The lighthouse visit proved challenging for Fern; there was a long and winding staircase to the top, which Fern had vowed she would conquer, and together with El she climbed, grinding her teeth as she tried not to complain or scold herself for making her stupid oath. El’s grin and quiet (but verbalised!) encouragement made it a little more worth it, and Fern let out a roar of triumph when she reached the

landing, scaring what looked like three different tour groups, who had also made it up the 137 steps. None the guides were speaking English, which mortified Fern quite a bit. These were visitors from abroad. Had she just inadvertently impressed upon them a falsified image of the regular American?

It was a warm, late-April's day; Fern forgot her worries about national identity as she and El looked out of the glass walls at the ocean, sidereal reflections of the sun's rays winking up at them as the waves lapped the land.

El had pressed her fingertips to the windowpane, staring into the distance. Her eyes were clouded with something Fern couldn't read; it made Fern wonder when El would finally cease to be an enigma.

"Mom," El spoke, not taking her sight off the water, "if you don't tell the whole truth, is it the same as a lie?"

"It isn't that simple, Elliebean."

They fell silent, polyglot murmurings of the foreign tourists the only sound between them.

"Say I - I caught a really rare fish," said Fern finally, thinking of how to analogise the concept of lying by omission, "but I don't tell anyone I have it. That's not a lie. Agree?"

"Yes."

"But," Fern blinked at the vast expanse of sea that stretched into the horizon, "say you've been searching, *combing* the ocean for this very rare fish. If we were friends, and I knew you'd been looking for this fish, and I didn't tell you that I had it, not even when you asked—I think that counts as a lie. But if I didn't know you, or you never told me you were looking for it, then I don't think it's a lie."

El's took an unsteady breath through her parted lips. She looked as terrified as someone who had to shed the weight of the world.

"Mom." El locked her gaze upon Fern's. "I knew they were looking for Will. The whole time."

Fern could see the tension in El's jaw as she clenched it, her lips corrugating as she fought back tears.

Fern closed her eyes, feeling like a colossal idiot. The thing that had been bothering El—it'd been staring Fern in the face all this while. El hadn't only been struggling with the fear that she'd been the one who put Will in the nether; no, she'd been mired in the guilt of not telling anybody where Will had been *right from the start*. She was feeling responsible that Will had been in the nether that long: she blamed herself for Will's illness, something that could've been avoided had they gotten to Will sooner.

The saddest thing was that El was right to feel this way.

But, a voice in Fern's head argued, El had been scared. She'd had no one to trust, no one to lean on. And hadn't she eventually been instrumental in locating Will, and making sure he was okay?

Yet, Fern reasoned, that had probably been El's conscience at work; El was trying to atone, to make up for what she should've done in the first place. It didn't absolve her of blame.

Still, there was no denying that given El's traumatic past, it was a great feat that she'd accomplished, overcoming her emotional hurdles to trust a bunch of strangers in a mere six days. Surely she deserved some leniency for that?

"Come here," whispered Fern, wrapping her arms around El.

"I lied to them." El cried into Fern's shoulder. "I'm the monster."

"Hey, don't say that." Fern shushed El, making sweeping strokes up and down her back. "You're no monster."

Fern took El by the shoulders and framed her face with her hands. This was El's own battle to fight, but Fern could at least be her shield.

"We'll fix this together, all right? You've done so much to help Joyce and Will; I don't think they'll hold it against you. They're good people, remember?"

El nodded, doing her best to compose herself for she was suddenly

conscious of the tourists trying not to stare at a crying child; and Fern hoped hard, as she gave El her handkerchief, that her opinion of the Byerses was right.

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The next morning was met with a call from the Duffers: they were inviting El to hang out with them and Will ('Will can't wait to meet her, so we thought we'd kill all the proverbial birds'), and Fern was faced with the options of (a) rejecting them, of course having to explain why by either lying about the state of El's health (which could lead to a postponement of the procedure) or telling them about how El had basically sabotaged an expeditious return to the real world for Will; or (b) accept the offer, and then have to explain to El why it'd have been weird to say no, and perhaps even face her wrath—a terrifying thought, seeing that it'd be their first fight (plus El had a history of flinging people against walls when she got upset; Fern didn't think she would do that, but she *could*, and it made a difference).

All scenarios: un-ideal.

"Let me get back to you," promised Fern, before hanging up the phone.

El was in the bathroom washing up, and Fern took the time alone to pace the carpet. She'd talk to El about it before calling the Duffers back, but honestly—how would El making the decision make things less awkward? She'd either say yes or no, still, and if El miraculously agreed to go, it'd be the worst playdate of all time, considering how she'd be feeling inside. But if she said no, how would she explain herself? Perhaps Fern 'could have scheduled' another educational field trip—to New York City, maybe. That would take a whole day; it was a nice excuse. But then they'd really have to go, and it was *really* far...

"Baby," said Fern the moment the bathroom door swung open, "Matt called to ask if you'd like to hang out with him and Ross and Will today."

El froze like a deer in headlights.

“I could call them back and tell them you’re going to spend the day in here.” Fern paused. “Though knowing them, they’ll come and check on you at some point, so you gotta be prepared for that, okay?”

A heartbeat.

“No. I’ll go,” whispered El.

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Fern should have suspected something was off. She’d guessed El’s motives after all; she should’ve anticipated her actions, foreseen the outcomes.

Instead her pride had eclipsed her circumspection; she’d been too busy assuming how courageous, sensible and mature her child was, to put herself out of her comfort zone, to nobly try and right things with Will, despite him not knowing there was something to be righted.

She hadn’t considered El’s methods of approaching the issue; she hadn’t thought that El was going to just drop a bombshell on Will, who’d even been looking forward to meeting El.

She’d been in another one-on-one session with Dr Tan when she received the call.

“Fern, this is Matt. Something’s happened between the kids, they’re at the rec room. El’s shut herself in and Will’s—”

Fern had bolted, barely hearing Ross finish his sentence with ‘really upset’, and she’d made for the elevator as fast as her legs would take her.

When she arrived at the scene Will had already left (he’d apparently escaped to his room, and Joyce had been duly notified) while El was keeping the door locked with her powers. Radioing from a place that broadcasted the camera feed from the rec room, Matt was updating Ross that El did not seem okay, and Ross held up the walkie-talkie so

Fern could listen as well.

“She looks really distressed,” said Matt, sounding concerned. “Still sobbing.”

Fern knocked on the door. “El?” she called.

“She’s looking in your direction.” Matt’s voice was full of promise, but it wilted as he added: “She’s also got quite a nosebleed. Ross, try the door again?”

Ross tried turning the key in the lock. “Won’t budge.”

“El, it’s Mom.” More knocks. “Let me in, please? We’ll figure things out together, okay?”

There was silence.

“She’s gone back to hugging her knees and burying her head between them,” informed Matt.

Fern paced, mind and heart racing, before she realised what the silence meant. She instructed Ross: “Try the key again.”

Ross did as he was told, and the door clicked open.

Fern rushed in and collapsed onto her haunches, legs folded under her; she swept El into her embrace and felt El clutching at her; El’s tears dampened Fern’s blouse and the blood from her nose smeared a streak of red on it; her chest heaved against Fern’s own. Fern rocked El back and forth, holding her tighter, whispering that she got her, and everything was going to be okay.

El cried harder.

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“How is she?” asked Ross, shooting to his feet the moment Fern entered the Duffers’ office.

“Asleep,” was Fern’s curt reply. She trained her eyes beadily on the

twins. “You guys owe me an explanation on why you left those kids alone.”

The brothers exchanged looks.

“We suggested playing a board game, but El asked if we could watch a movie instead, and since Will was obviously cool with *Star Wars*, I went out to get popcorn,” said Matt, not too defensively.

“After Matt left for the kitchen, El asked if she could have Eggos, so I radioed Matt to bring up some if they had any. Something was wrong with the transmission and Matt couldn’t hear, so I tried calling the kitchen phone; there was nothing but a dial tone, so I told the kids I’d try calling him from another room, and that’s when I got locked out.”

“On hindsight, it was probably El using her powers.” Matt shook his head, sounding fascinated in spite of himself. “I wish we’d known, man, that was actually pretty cool—” Matt shut up when he caught Fern’s disgruntled stare.

Ross waved a tape in front of Fern. “We did catch their whole exchange on camera. There’s audio, too.”

“Should I be more worried about their exchange, or the fact that your rec room has a remote gallery?”

“Come on, Fern; you know this is a government lab. Surveillance is prerequisite.”

“Also I think our bosses want to make sure we’re not watching porny tapes at work.”

“...You watch porny tapes at work?”

“No, Fern, ew.”

Ross slotted the tape into the VCR, and the three of them gathered in front of the TV. Ross fast-forwarded to the bit where he left the room, then hit ‘Play’.

El and Will had been sitting on individual bean bag chairs, and El turned to face Will after fixating on the door.



“Will?” The name came uttered as a tremor.

Will looked at El, and though the picture wasn’t very clear, Fern could see his unguardedness, his cordiality.

“I’m sorry,” said El, voice breaking.

Will frowned. “What for?”

El took a deep breath. “*It’s my fault you were in the Upside Down.*”

Will went very still. The timer on the video counted every second the children were silent; it took eight seconds for Will to respond.

“What?”

El’s face fell as she swiped her nose with her sleeve. “*I was in the Upside Down, and I saw you with the monster in the wooden house; I tried to pull it back, but I think - I think I did something...*”

Will relaxed. “*You took away the monster?*”

“I - I—” El couldn’t seem to find the words.

Will stepped closer to Eleven, his voice rising excitedly. “*It was coming for me when something... Something pulled me away, and I went flying through this blur, and the next thing I knew I was falling...*”

Will stopped mid-sentence.

“Will?” El edged closer, looking disconcerted as Will’s eyes darted around rapidly.

“I’m - I’m okay,” said Will after a second, mustering a smile.

Fern frowned. “Is Will having one of his flashbacks?”

“Looks like it,” Matt said grimly.

“*It couldn’t be your fault, Eleven—if anything, I think you helped me, because the monster wasn’t in the Upside Down when I arrived. I had time to hide.*”

Fern could see that the rhythm of El's breathing had turned chaotic.

Will went on:

*"Mike told me how you saw me in a picture, then searched for me on his Supercom, right? And on the Heathkit and in the kiddie pool... Well, you know the rest."* Will reached out to place a hand on El's shoulder. *"Thank you. For helping to save my life."*

El stared at Will's hand for several seconds, and Fern could tell she was about to cry.

*"Lucas was right,"* El said, shying away from Will, pushing his hand away.

*"Huh?"*

*"I could have told them where the Upside Down was right away,"* El's voice shattered, *"and when I saw the picture I knew where you were, but I let you stay in there. I'm sorry, Will. I'm so sorry."*

Will's mouth fell open.

There was a sound coming from the door, in the video; Fern realised it was Ross trying the handle.

*"Guys?"* Ross's voice travelled faintly into the picture, *"I hadn't pegged you as pranksters, but you know I have the key, right?"*

El ignored Ross, and then Fern saw it: her nose was bleeding.

*"You mean... you left me there? Even though you could have called for help right from the beginning?"*

*"I'm sorry. I was scared."*

*"I was scared too! And I didn't have superpowers!"*

*"It's my fault; I'm the monster,"* choked El. *"I'm sorry, Will."*

Will recoiled. *"What do you mean, you're the monster?"*

*"I opened the gate. It's all my fault."*

*"What gate, Eleven?"* Will was sounding disoriented.

*"To the Upside Down."*

*"What? It was you?"*

"I could hear what they were saying," explained Ross, "so I tried radioing Matt. The channel was open again, and I told Matt to run down to the security room to see what was going on, and call you and Joyce if it was them having a fight or something."

Fern turned her attention back to the tape.

*"I'm sorry,"* El repeated, pleadingly. Fern knew El was prompting Will to say something that hinted at forgiveness, and Fern felt like something had punched her in the gut because it definitely hadn't happened.

*"No, stop saying sorry!"* Will stood up, his fists clenched.

El's chest heaved with a sob.

*"It was the worst place—"* Will's coughs interrupted his speech, and he hurriedly made for a box of tissues sitting on a shelf as he hacked up something the camera couldn't film because he had his back toward it.

*"El? Will?"* called Ross from outside, back at the door. *"Open up, please."* Ross rattled the handle again before leaving the door, saying something about getting something to break it open.

El stood up from her seat, inching closer to Will. She looked at what Will was holding and her jaw dropped.

*"If only you knew what it'd been like in there,"* said Will, sounding uncharacteristically spiteful and cold.

He held out the thing in his hands to make his point, and Fern grimaced as she saw it was indeed what Joyce had said: a slug-like organism, and it had to be at least three inches long, judging by its proportions in Will's hand.

El backed away from Will, plunging her face into her hands. *"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."*

Will balled up the tissue and made for the door. He swung it open and stormed out, and from the shadow Fern could see moving across the blinds she knew Ross had been running down the hallway trying to get to El, but before he could El had shut the door again.

"Will," called Ross, *"where are you going?"*

Fern couldn't hear Will's reply; he'd moved too far from the camera microphone.

El sank into her bean bag chair, hugging her knees close and crying. The screen froze, signalling the end of the recording. Matt hit the 'Stop' button, rendering the screen a flickering grey.

"El was very brave," said Matt quietly. He hadn't spoken throughout the entire video. "It must've been terrifying for her to own up to Will like that."

Fern met Matt's eyes, and she managed a tiny smile.

"I get why Will's mad, though," Ross spoke up, shrugging as he started rewinding the tape to replay the conversation.

"So do I," Fern was quick to agree, "he's heard all these good things about her, he thought they were going to be friends... I mean, so did you two, obviously."

"We wanted them to clue us in on their experiences in the nether, yes, but we didn't expect this to happen." Matt rubbed his face with his palm. "I'm sorry, Fern. We actually genuinely like these kids, and it sucks to see them having to go through this."

The mood in the room stayed sombre as the three scientists pondered; the air was thick with unuttered questions, Fern's mostly centred on how to help El cope with her feelings, and whether she should speak to Joyce...

It took a while before Fern noticed Ross was playing the same conversation over and over again.

“—because the monster wasn’t in the Upside Down when—” Ross paused Will before he could finish his sentence and rewind the tape.

“Guys, there’s something about this...” said Ross, hitting ‘Play’ at the part where El was starting to talk about how she spied Will in the shed from her vantage point in the nether.

“She said she ‘did something’—what was it?” Ross asked aloud.

Fern recalled the conversation she’d had with El a couple of nights back, when El first confessed her connection with Will’s disappearance.

“El seems to think that it’s her fault Will was stuck in the nether,” admitted Fern, knowing she couldn’t withhold the information any longer; besides, the Duffers were here to help. “She said she knew the monster wouldn’t hurt her, so she tried to pull it back in with her, using her powers—but the next thing she knew she was out of the nether, back in the real world. She only found out Will was trapped there when her friends revealed he was missing. She thinks it’s something she did when she tried dragging the monster to her. Some technical mistake or something. What baffles me is, how did El know the monster wouldn’t hurt her?”

There was a beat, then the answer struck all of them at the same time, Fern feeling slow for not realising it on her own.

“Parasitic twin,” they chorused, the moment almost celebratory.

Ross snapped his fingers before stabbing his pointer in the air. “Makes sense, because that night, when she escaped the lab—she said the monster led her out. She must’ve known innately she had some sort of immunity; they probably had some sort of empathy going on.”

“Bringing her to the other side, though...” Matt frowned at his brother. “Why would it put her in there?”

“To keep her away from the Hawkins Lab people?” suggested Ross. “Maybe its powers got amplified when El was in the nether?”

“Could be.” Matt turned to Fern. “Oh yeah, Fern—we’re waiting for the test results.”

“What test results?”

“Remember the other day we were laying all our theories on the table, and we talked about how El and the monster share some sort of biological connection? We ran a twin test with their DNA. And to make it even more comprehensive, we’re running the test on Will’s slug things as well. The investigation team is with us on the parasitic twin theory, and it should be proven true if the tests come back showing us that El and the monster share the same DNA.”

“Though it’s likely that it’s only fifty per cent, because El doesn’t look anything like the monster.”

Fern set her mouth into a grim line. “Still doesn’t explain what happened that put Will in the other dimension.”

They heaved a collective sigh of agreement as Ross hit ‘Play’ on the VCR again.

“If we think of this as a particularly addictive disco tune, it’s not too bad,” said Ross, after yet another play-through. He bobbed to make his point.

Fern was about to tear down his joke when Matt inhaled sharply, jabbed a finger at the TV and said: “You guys. ‘The Upside Down’. The kids call the nether *The Upside Down*.”

Fern and Ross blinked at Matt.

Then Ross gasped as well, and Fern threw up her hands, not getting it. It had to be a twin thing.

“She flipped them!” exclaimed Ross, slapping his hand against his forehead. “El made a tear in spacetime—”

“—and she and Will got sucked into the other’s dimension!” yelled Matt triumphantly, fists flying into the air.

“Oh my god. Is she even powerful enough to do that?”

“The monster was powerful enough to constantly make tears in spacetime, and if it’d fed off El’s energy or mind at some point I don’t

see why she couldn't do it too." Ross looked at Fern. "She must have really wanted to save Will, to generate that sort of power. She shouldn't be thinking that she's to blame for what happened to him."

Fern felt giddy; the brothers were thinking very fast, and she wasn't sure she could keep up with their newfound conclusions.

"Pause right there," commanded Matt, pointing at the TV. Ross hit the button.

"Will had been saying how he hadn't met the monster when he got to the other side," said Matt, striding over to a dry-erase board, "so if El ended up in the Right Side Up, and Will in the Upside Down—" Matt drew a vector diagram, "—and we add some hypothetical values to these forces, the resultant force would have led the monster to..." Matt looked up at Fern and Ross. "The In Between."

"You're not just making this up, right?" asked Ross.

"Not really," said Matt, pointing at his vector, "look. We know there are two dimensions, but what if there's a slip in the middle?"

"The limbo of spacetime?" suggested Ross.

"Something like that."

Fern frowned. "I think I get what you're saying—I don't really like to extrapolate from fiction, but 'A Wrinkle in Time' comes to mind. You know, when they were explaining how the ant crosses from one hand to the other on a thread or something? When the thread was brought together it formed a wrinkle. You're talking about that wrinkle, right? Except in El and Will's case it's not about time, but space."

"Yes!" said Matt enthusiastically. "That's exactly it! The In Between is the wrinkle. And, by the way, Fern—it was a skirt. Not thread."

"Oh, tomato, tomahto."

"Guys, you know how the monster could appear in one place, disappear, then reappear almost immediately in another?" thought Ross out loud. "What if the In Between is a travelling dimension? A sort of moving conveyor belt that runs between the nether and our

world, with stops on either side?”

“...Ross, you're brilliant. We have to record this, run it by the team.”

“So you're saying El inadvertently put the monster in the In Between long enough for it not to materialise in front of Will and harm him?” asked Fern.

“Yeah, why not? Will said so himself: El pulling the monster out gave him some time to run away.”

“I wonder how it worked, though. The technical aspects of it.”

“Maybe it struggled when El pulled it back, which means it exerted a force of its own—though judging from the evidence, possibly a second too late. It's not as important, however,” Matt's forehead creased deeply, “as helping Will understand that El tried her best to set things right. She tried to protect him, and was then instrumental in getting him back. El grew up in a lot of fear and anxiety, and she put her reservations away to help his family save him. I think that's worth something.”

Fern reached out to touch Matt's arm in gratitude; he clasped her hand in both of his and patted it encouragingly. She then felt a weight on her shoulders; it was Ross putting an arm around her.

“When we get everything figured out, we'll get the kids and you moms together and make all this real—with hard evidence.”

“Yeah. Let us handle this. Some things are easier to accept when it's coming from someone else who isn't involved, you know? Like how spectators sometimes see a game with more clarity than the players; they aren't likely to reject the audience's opinions. I'm sure the Byerses will listen to what we have to say.”

Fern nodded. “I really hope Will gets well—it'd make it easier for him to forgive El.”

“Shawn and his team are still figuring out how to cure Will, but he did say that the more we know about the monster and the Upside Down, the better; so everything is really coming together. Don't worry.”



The Duffers were proving to be superb friends.

“Thank you,” Fern croaked, giving the brothers a smile.

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There was no concord whatsoever in the idea of meeting Joyce, even though Fern knew it was the right thing to do.

It wasn't logical to feel what she did—guilt and shame, mostly, though the disconcertion was actually justified seeing that this involved her kid and Joyce's kid, who were currently going through a rough patch with each other.

But Joyce's beef would have been with El, not Fern, and even though El was her child, Fern hadn't raised El; she couldn't lay claim to her behaviours and thoughts.

“Have a seat,” said Joyce, and Fern obediently perched on the armchair in Joyce's room. It was identical to the one she shared with El, except with frillier curtains and better sunlight.

“Joyce—I'm sorry,” Fern began, “I didn't know El would...” She trailed off lamely. “Well, I didn't know what happened.”

Joyce was being very civil, pouring her tea and smiling tightly, and it made Fern feel worse because she'd expected Joyce to overreact and yell like the time she yelled at her eldest in the middle of the street, and it hadn't been a very nice thing to think about a person, especially not about Joyce, whom Fern genuinely liked.

“How are you - how are you feeling?” Fern ventured timidly.

Joyce settled the teapot down on a coaster. She sighed, seating herself opposite Fern.

“I watched the tape, and the Duffers explained things to me.” Joyce shrugged apologetically. “But I can't help it—I'm still angry. Probably not as angry as Will is, of course, but still upset.”

Fern fell quiet, unable to afford any consolation.

Both mothers sat there, silent, watching the steam rise from their teacups.

“I’m sorry. For El’s—” Fern wasn’t sure if it was the right word, but it was the first to come to mind, “—selfishness.”

Joyce’s lips came asunder as she stared at Fern.

“Oh, Fern.” Joyce shook her head. “Don’t say that about her. She wasn’t being selfish. She was just scared.” Joyce looked at her hands, folded in her lap. “She’s just a child. They’re both children; we need to remember that.”

Fern nodded. “Thank you for the reminder.”

Joyce rubbed her face with her palms, sighing. “I’m surprised I’m not losing my shit like how I usually would. Like how people expect Joyce Byers to.”

Fern didn’t say anything. Joyce knew herself well.

Joyce gazed at Fern haplessly. “This—all of this,” Joyce flung a hand into the air, “has changed me.” Joyce gave a laugh that didn’t really sound like one. “Losing Will gave me a taste of being pushed to the edge—it was terrifying, especially after meeting Terry. ‘That could’ve been me,’ I think every day. And even though he’s sick, at least he’s *here*. I got him back, and it makes me feel...” Joyce trailed off, searching for the words.

“Lucky?” suggested Fern.

Joyce nodded. “And thankful. Jonathan says I’m calmer now. Says I’m able to check myself before I launch into ‘crazy mom mode’. That has to be a good thing, right?”

Joyce’s gaze turned keen. “I can see that Eleven tried her best to make things right, that it’s not worth it to bear a grudge; I can see all these things now—that there are more important things to care about, like Will getting better, and being grateful that he is alive to even feel indignant.”

Fern heard the meaning behind Joyce’s words—she wasn’t saying

that she forgave El; she was saying that she wanted to. It was magnanimous of Joyce, and it moved Fern greatly.

“Still, Will’s my kid, and I have to be on his side.” Joyce’s eyes misted up. “But for what it’s worth, Fern, I’m - I’m sorry that I’m angry.”

Fern shook her head, reprieve and sympathy filling her. “We all crave justice for our kids; get angry all you want,” said Fern, reaching out to place her hand on Joyce’s.

Joyce cast her eyes downward, but didn’t pull away; to Fern, that was enough.

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Fern had been called by Shawn Levy after her meeting with Joyce to ‘discuss something important’, and she soon found herself in Shawn’s office—the Duffers already there—looking at a table of numbers that she could barely decipher. She knew it had to do with DNA, and some of it was correlated. How exactly, Shawn was about to explain.

“These are the readings from the blood and tissue samples you gave us, Fern,” said Shawn, pointing to some columns on a chart, “the monster DNA, if you will. And these, the readings from the stuff Will’s been hacking up.”

Fern squinted at the set of data. “And these numbers belong to?” Fern pointed.

“El.”

Fern raised her eyebrows. El was related to the monster. Their parasitic twin theory was proving less crazy than she’d thought. She looked at the rest of the data.

“So there’s a definite correlation between the things inside of Will, and the monster?” asked Fern.

“No doubt about it, yes,” agreed Shawn, tracing the corresponding columns on the sheet of paper. “You know those visions he’s been having?”

Fern nodded. "Joyce said he has flashbacks of the nether."

"They aren't flashbacks. That tape that Will and El was on? We slowed down the part where Will seemed to experience a vision—"

Fern remembered—Will had stopped mid-sentence and his eyes had gotten kind of wild...

"—and the footage showed that for a tiny split-second, Will wasn't in the room." Shawn paused. "He wasn't just seeing the other dimension, Fern. He was *in* it. He was travelling. He's still stuck in there, in some way. He's back here with us, most of the time, but not entirely. And he's bringing those slug-like things back with him."

Fern shuddered. "So he's not actually producing those things?"

"Not inside of himself. They're *appearing* in him."

"What?" Fern was dumbfounded. "Why can't they just multiply happily in their own dimension? Why disturb Will?"

Ross held up a finger. "We actually have an answer for that. Joyce mentioned that Will had been infiltrated by the monster with a probe that passed through his mouth and into his lungs, encasing him inside a cocoon belonging to the alternate dimension; even though we can't find actual traces of it now, we're theorising that these parts of the Upside Down... *remember* Will because of the biological connection."

"And it sought him out because...?" Fern felt she was still missing something.

"Assuming that the monster and the Upside Down run on the same properties, the Upside Down is attracted to Will because it recognises life and wants to feed on it."

Fern frowned. "Wait—wasn't the monster attracted to death?"

"You're thinking about how it was drawn to blood, Fern," said Shawn patiently. "That's exactly what we're saying—it was drawn to blood; to *life*. It doesn't feed on the dead, if you remember."

Fern's mouth rounded. That actually made sense.

“And about the slugs—we ran autopsies on several samples, and while they’re toxic, none have been able to survive outside of a human. It doesn’t make them harmless, though; even though Will can expel them, if they remain inside of him long enough, they’ll multiply and eventually damage him.”

Fern made a face. “So it’s like abhorrent monster phlegm?”

“You could put it that way.” Shawn’s expression took a severe turn. “The thing is, they sort of come alive when they’re in Will. Will is providing them with the energy they need to live. He’s their Dr Frankenstein.”

Fern looked at Matt and Ross; they’d advocated this theory, judging by the look on their faces.

“Okay—so I guess all that’s left now is for us to go back into the dimension to root out the thing that’s spawning them? Like how you stop a bleeder by closing up a wound?” asked Fern.

“We’re getting to that,” said Shawn. “At some point, we discovered that the monster phlegm was giving off a pretty substantial amount of radiation, and we decided to scan the kids as well...” Shawn hesitated, and Fern immediately knew what the results had been.

“It wasn’t just thermal, I assume?” Fern sighed.

“Both the kids emit similar kinds of non-thermal electromagnetic radiation. It’s highly unnatural.”

Fern pressed her thumbs against the sides of her head. “I think you’re trying to tell me that the kids are radioactive?”

“They are.” Shawn gave Fern a sorry look. “Well, El is.”

Fern caught the change in semantics. “What are you saying, Shawn?”

Shawn exchanged looks with the Duffers, who were wearing identical frowns and nodding in tandem. None of it was comical.

Shawn came up close to Fern and cradled her elbow.

“This is what we wanted to speak to you about. You see, Will has all that gunk inside of him—that’s what making him give off all these readings. At the end of the day, he’s only a host. El, on the other hand...”

“No,” breathed Fern, “don’t tell me she really is the monster?”

“Oh, no,” said Shawn hastily, waving his hands, “it’s more complicated than that.”

He took a deep breath.

“El powers the dimension, Fern. Her mind is the Upside Down.”

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El was in another session of psych evaluation that afternoon, so Fern ventured into the courtyard to sit by herself and arrange all the new information the Duffers and Shawn had just heaped onto her plate.

It was daunting to consider that El was something as humongous as a universe. Fern didn’t want to believe it, but science was brutal that way; all the empirical evidence pointed to El as the cause of Will’s woes.

The Duffers and Shawn hadn’t just come up with their conclusions in just a week; for the past decade or so the Duffers’ *Project Unscrew* had involved teams of scientists constructing postulates, collating evidence and investigating theories about Brenner’s work, and now that they had all these missing pieces of the puzzle—the information from the Hawkins Lab database, knowledge of the parasitic twin, its connection to Anita, the relationship between El and Will—everything was coming together for them. It was supposed to be victorious and special as their theories were getting proven, but it just... wasn’t.

“Hey, you.”

Upon hearing the voice, Fern looked up at the figure casting a shadow on her reverie. Her jaw went slack.

“Dom!” Fern screeched, causing a flock of sparrows nearby to take flight. “What are you doing here?”

Fern shot off the bench and catapulted herself into Dom’s arms, and he let out a small ‘oof’ as he caught her, chuckling.

They hadn’t seen each other since Fern moved out of Hawkins; that had been over three months ago, and Fern missed Dom desperately.

“I was worried about you,” said Dom, “so I phoned the Duffers and asked if I could come and give you some emotional support.”

Fern buried her face into Dom’s chest. He smelt like home, so deliciously familiar; earthy and peppery with a touch of mint-kissed orange. She couldn’t wait for him to meet El. But first—

“Something’s cropped up with the procedure.” Fern looked up at Dom, gripping his arms. “I really need someone to talk to.”

“You know why I’m here.” Dom nodded.

“Forever and a day, Dom Price, I owe you,” said Fern solemnly, taking his sleeve and leading him to the bench.

“Aw, Fern Thayer. You say the sweetest things, but don’t forget who gave me a home when I was down on my luck and out on the streets. I wouldn’t be who I am without you, and you know I’m not just saying that.”

Fern smiled up at Dom. “You’re my sanity, Dom.”

“And I love you too,” declared Dom, throwing his arm around Fern.

“So you know how Joyce Byers and her son is here?” Fern cut straight to the chase.

“Yeah, I know about that. Will’s here for treatment, right?”

“Yes. And they found this connection between Will, El—that’s what we call Eleven now—and the monster...”

Fern proceeded to catch Dom up with everything that had happened

during the past few days: Will's condition, how the kids were basically radioactive, how that came about because of the toxic elements of the Upside Down, how the DARPA scientists' findings pointed to El actually being the dimension itself. Well, in her head, at least.

"Hang on," Dom held up a hand, "how did it come to that?"

"Well," Fern took a deep breath, recalling what Shawn had told her earlier, "they ruled out El being the monster, right? So there had to be another explanation for her non-normative electromagnetic readings. They ran a bunch of tests on their blood and stuff like that, I'm not going to get too technical, but basically they were able to see how Will is biologically okay, and El is not."

"Just because she's got radioactive material in her physiological makeup doesn't make her an alternate dimension," Dom pointed out.

"That was what I thought. But we can't forget Anita. Remember she said all those things about there being a chest and how she locked up all the bad stuff in it? The idea is she created the alternate dimension—the chest—and the stuff that was inside of it became the monster. She *made* El into the chest, Dom. Instead of passing on her drug addiction, she gave El this."

They were quiet for a moment before Dom spoke.

"So El made Anita's imagination come to life?"

"Yes," said Fern, frustration tinting her sigh. "Any comic book explanations for this? I'd feel better if this had already been dreamed up in fiction."

Dom scrunched up his face, thinking. "Well, not comic books, but did you watch 'The Twilight Zone'? I know you didn't watch last year's film, but did you at least catch the TV show? It aired when... you were in college. 1961."

"Didn't watch it."

"Damn, Fern. I hope it was fun, living under a rock."



“You and the Duffers have to trust me when I say those days were *replete* with amusement.”

Dom rolled his eyes, but Fern didn't miss how they smiled.

“Anyway,” said Dom, going back to his fictional references, “in ‘The Twilight Zone’ there's this character, this kid called Anthony Fremont. He could turn his imagination into reality, do horrible things with it. I guess what El can do is a diminutive form of that. Not unbelievable, seeing how she's practically a Jedi.”

“A what?”

“...Never mind.”

Fern sighed again, louder this time. “Okay, so—the scientists say because the dimension exists in El's mind, it exists outside of it as well. Shawn said Will's circling the drain but not falling in or getting out, and the longer he's circling the more damage there will be to him, physically and mentally. Now, the only way they can stop it is to cut his ties to the dimension, and to do that they'll have to close the dimension itself.”

Fern stopped, giving Dom a purposeful look.

Dom blinked before asking, very slowly:

“What are they going to do to El?”

Fern knew Dom would make the connection.

“The doctors want to open her up,” groaned Fern, burying her head into Dom's shoulder. “They've proposed cracking open her skull to apply the drugs directly to the parts of the brain that control imagination, and I am *not* down for that; not at all. Too many things could go wrong.”

Dom hummed. “Well, what are the pros?”

“You know how the serum is supposed to shut down the part of El's brain that allows her to manipulate her powers? That bit of the brain happens to be inside the area that stores memory, which is why she'll

forget things. Opening her up would mean they would have greater precision in administering the drugs to that area; they're hoping to minimise the memory loss. That, I guess, is the silver lining. But now that we've found out that El's constructing the nether with her mind, the serum has to be tweaked to also affect the area of the brain that controls imagination—this means, I don't know what's going to happen after the formula is changed. They're going to let me know after they run some tests."

Dom was looking perplexed. "How is this more effective than the original plan of delivering the serum through a spinal tap?"

"Whenever drugs for the brain are administered via the spine, it's mostly just the doctors crossing their fingers and hoping that the chemicals would swim up the bloodstream and cross the blood-brain barrier to reach the brain."

"Hang on, hang on. Blood-brain barrier? What's that?"

"The BBB—it's this wall of cells in some regions of the brain that decides what can pass through and what can't, filtering out what it thinks is bad for the brain. However, in drugs that actually help people get better, there's good stuff in there as well, except the BBB classifies it as bad and doesn't let it through. That's what we're afraid of: the chance that not all of the good stuff gets to the sick parts. And DARPA, with its bright minds and cutting-edge technology, has doctors who can perform feats like opening up the head and putting the medicine right onto the sick parts, bypassing the uncertainty of whether or not the BBB can be penetrated."

"But you made the serum so that the good stuff would pass through the barrier, didn't you? Can't they just put the modified drug into the bloodstream?"

Fern shook her head. "According to Shawn, after the tweak, that won't happen. The serum's compounds have a different ratio now."

"How dangerous is the surgery?"

"You want to ask me that as a mom, or as someone who's been working with these doctors for years?"

Dom held Fern's gaze for a moment. He knew what she was getting at.

"If you don't like the idea, you could say no," said Dom. "You're her legal guardian."

"I could, but it all goes back to Will. I don't know if I could live with the guilt. He could die from this, Dom."

"So could El."

"Yeah, but let's be honest—these people know what they're doing, and they've taken years to prepare for this day. They have all her medical records since she was a *baby*, no thanks to you helping them hack into the database." With a sigh, Fern slumped back against the bench. "No matter if she goes through with the surgery, or the original procedure, El wouldn't remember anything either way. It's all on me, Dom. And if I stop the surgery, and El somehow miraculously remembers all of this someday, and we leave Will to - to *decay*... She'd hate me, Dom, I just know it. Along with Joyce, and everyone who loves Will."

Dom sighed heavily. "Does El know about any of this?"

"No. And I don't feel like telling her," Fern pitched her face into her hands, "because she's already devastated about her role in the entire situation, and she'd want to undergo surgery if she thinks she has a chance to fix it. She feels so bad about what's happened to Will, Dom. But what would I do if something goes wrong? I can't lose her."

"She'll find out eventually, though," said Dom softly. "You guys are here for the procedure; if it doesn't happen, she'll start to question."

"I know." Fern looked at Dom, sadness pooling in her eyes. "I know."

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It was clear, from her wrist-wringing and pacing and desperate looks, that El was having an incredibly hard time dealing with the fact that she had some kind of supernatural universe in her head.

The adults had sat her down and told her, as gently as they could, that she wasn't the monster. She'd been relieved for a moment, but then her expression shifted, and Fern had read her scepticism: El knew she still had a part to play in Will's disappearance and subsequent illness, and she knew they knew what it was.

It had been hard for Fern to be the one explaining it: it felt self-serving to say it was all Anita's fault. It was the truth, but it cut deep, because here Fern was saying how Anita had completely failed her daughter—their daughter—and they, the survivors, were now saddled with the responsibility of cleaning up Anita's mess.

Fern had left the bit about the surgery out; she didn't want to jump the gun, not when the tweak to the formula wasn't finalised.

Fern knew El didn't do the whole outpouring of anguish thing most people did (then again, how many teenagers actually talked to their parents about their problems?), but El had opened up to her considerably well ever since they'd first met, confiding in Fern a great many things she wouldn't have told anybody else. Fern knew she couldn't discount this; to El, speaking to anybody about what was bothering her was probably a newfangled concept that she had only just started to adopt, no thanks to the way Brenner had raised her.

Joyce's words rang in Fern's head:

*Will's my kid, and I have to be on his side.*

Fern decided she had to do the same for El.

"El, baby—we need to talk."

Fern led El to the armchair that sat in a sunny spot by the window, Fern's afghan still draped over it from the previous night when she had, once again, fallen asleep while watching El struggle with a nightmare.

Fern knelt on the floor and clasped El's hands in hers. "I'm trying to put myself in your shoes," Fern scanned El's face for comprehension—there was hesitation, "which means I'm trying to imagine how you feel, and I think you have a lot you want to say, but you don't really

know how.”

El’s silence spelt agreement. Fern tried not to look like how she felt; she painted on as much bravado on her face as she could.

“I need you to know that you are safe with me. Your thoughts, your emotions, your tears, your pain—I will take care of them and nurse them like they are my own,” said Fern, trying to keep her voice steady. “This means you aren’t alone. I’m your mom, and you’re allowed to depend on me. Your problems are mine, too. Do you understand?”

Tears spilt over onto El’s cheeks. “Yes.”

Fern paused, clenching her fists on El’s knees, summoning all her powers of empathy.

“I’m sorry about all the bad news we had to break to you. Matt, Ross and I agreed that you need to know you’re *not* the monster. It was something that you believed, and we couldn’t let you go on believing something that wasn’t true. But we also knew you’re smart; you know you have a connection to all this, and it’d only have made you more anxious if we didn’t give you a worthwhile explanation. That’s why we decided to tell you the truth.

“I know it’s not necessarily a comfort to know that you’re not the monster. But you need to remember it’s not your fault that this happened. Anita created the Upside Down, the monster, the way it lives on inside the Upside Down, the way it consumes life—it was all her. She put it in you. And Brenner made you unleash it to the world. None of this is on you, El.”

“No.” El was shaking her head, looking aggrieved. “I let Will stay in the Upside Down.”

“Honey, I know being told ‘it’s not your fault’ isn’t making you feel better but you have to accept this: we’re telling you that there were some things you simply couldn’t stop from happening. We’re not absolving you entirely from blame when it comes to what happened to Will, because we agree with you: there were things you could’ve done. It’s true that you failed him, but you’ve tried to face up to it

and fix it. I understand how it didn't go well, but you're not alone in this. I really want to help you with that. Matt and Ross too; and Shawn. Even Joyce, I think."

El nodded as she wiped her face with her fingers, eyes still leaking tears.

"I just want - Will - to get better," El managed to say between the sobs she fought to control.

"Me too," whispered Fern, pulling El into a hug.

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The serum was successfully modified three days before El was supposed to undergo the procedure.

"I feel sick," confessed Fern to Dom, as she downed her scotch. "I don't know how to tell her. And I have to tell her before the meeting tomorrow."

"What meeting?" asked Dom.

"The project leaders are going to sit the Byerses, El and me down and explain the technicalities of the relationship between the kids and how it's going to affect the procedure, and formally seek consent for all the medical stuff." Fern gave Dom a tight smile. "Maybe I shouldn't tell El at all. Maybe I should pack our bags, run away and forget all of this ever happened."

"Great plan, if you like the life of a fugitive. The CIA is still looking for her, don't forget. Last I heard, they were investigating the lab's databases. It won't be long before they find the trojan horse, though by that time DARPA would've had enough intel and the device would've been deactivated remotely from out here. 'Course, they'd be able to figure out what it was for eventually, but we'd be long out of their hair."

Fern felt the seconds crawl by as she watched Dom, who'd averted his eyes and touched his glass to his lips without taking a drink.

“Is there something you’re not telling me, Dom?”

Dom finally dragged his line of sight back to Fern. “It’s gotten a bit dangerous for me too, Fern. I mean, DARPA’s given me a great cover, erased all my tracks and everything, but they’ve decided I have to leave Hawkins. I didn’t want you to worry, so I’ve been waiting for the right time to tell you, but yeah... I don’t work at the lab anymore. In fact, I’m in the midst of selling my house.”

“Oh. Okay,” said Fern, nodding to compose herself. She too had to leave everything behind: her company, now in the hands of Alfonso; Janice, someone she considered as a real friend and who was probably still having sleepless nights because of Barb; and Becky and Terry, who were practically family at this point. She’d told them she had to go back to Pittsburgh to settle things for her parents’ estate. It wasn’t a complete lie, but it wasn’t the truth all the same.

“Well, we did expect this, all those years back when we decided to work with DARPA.” Fern let the guilt into her voice. “When you decided to help me.”

“Hey,” said Dom in gentle warning, “it was all voluntary. Don’t overthink.”

“Well, where are you going to live?”

“There’s a college in New Albany that has an opening for a facilities manager. DARPA’s gonna rig something up for me.”

“No plans to move back to Pittsburgh?”

“I like Indiana.” Dom shrugged. “Pittsburgh still reminds me of my childhood, my mom. You know. I can forgive, but it’s hard to forget—even after all these years.”

“I understand.”

There was a pregnant pause, then Dom said:

“I can’t imagine what El went through, but I know what it’s like to be a broken kid. And for what it’s worth, I think you shouldn’t discount El’s empathy. Don’t cheapen it, s’what I’m saying. Kids like El—it’s a

daily fight for them, you know? To make sense of the world. They are trying so hard every day to rise above the odds. It takes guts to be a better person, to want to save someone when you yourself just clawed your way to land—because you know *exactly* how it feels like to drown. You gotta respect that, Fern.”

Dom met Fern’s eyes in silent appeal, and finally, she knew what she had to do.

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There were two things that surprised Fern after she told El of the new proposal the doctors were pitching. The first was how El took the news. She was uncharacteristically verbal, asking questions about the differences between the spinal tap and the craniotomy, comparing the effects of each and even asking for the prognosis for both her and Will post-surgery. It was highly impressive; El was a lot more intelligent and observant than any of them had imagined.

The other thing that surprised Fern was learning that Will didn’t have to go under the knife. She’d assumed that Will’s recovery was tied to an invasive procedure as well, but Will was exempt from it—instead, he was going to serve as what Shawn described as ‘El’s ECG monitor’. The medical team explained that technically, Will’s condition didn’t have a cure; he just needed to get the organisms out of his body. This meant all Will had to do was to get hooked up to machines while El was in surgery, should she elect to undergo it, and the doctors would be using special machines to monitor his electromagnetic radiation levels, and detect the presence (or lack thereof) of the monster spawn that plagued him. Once El stopped creating the Upside Down, Will would (technically) be okay.

“Let me do it,” said El, pleading, when she had all the answers she needed.

The next two days passed in a blur; El had to undergo a fresh bout of counselling to make sure she was truly ready, and she took all of it in her stride. She was different, Fern realised, led by the hope she so firmly clung on to, finding confidence in the identity she now held as the alpha and omega of Will’s problems. It was now in her power to



stop what she had started, and El was bent on being Will's remedy.

"She's so motivated to save Will," commented Dom as they waited outside a room where El was finishing a test that would confirm she wasn't allergic to the other drugs the surgeons were going to use to keep her vitals stable. "I wonder if it's really just her trying to make up for things."

"Well, she's got a kind heart."

Dom was shaking his head. "That's not what I'm getting at. Has it ever crossed your mind that it could be love?"

Fern couldn't help but laugh. "Are you trying to say she's in love with Will?"

"It's not that funny, Fern," said Dom admonishingly. "El's not emotionally stunted or anything; she knows what love is. I've seen the way she looks at you."

"Yes, but *that* kind of love? Really?"

"Why not?" Dom stared at a spot on the wall. "Think about it. What if she's doing this because Will is important to her that way?"

"I don't know, Dom..."

But Fern kept Dom's words in her heart as she made it through the day. The clock counted down with each event—there were the briefings by the doctors, meetings with the Duffers, discussions with the team working on the serum—she also managed to catch Joyce in the hallway the night before the surgery, and they shared a tearful moment as Joyce confessed she was as worried about the operation as Fern was. Though they had different sets of fears and guilts, they both involved thoughts of children dying; and in a way Fern was thankful she and Joyce could support each other, an unusual alliance though it was given that the fates of their children were now thus entwined.

"Mom," said El as Fern returned to the room after her encounter with Joyce, "tomorrow, before the surgery, I want to talk to Will."

It'd been several days since the episode in the rec room, and Will still hadn't indicated that he wanted to communicate with El in any way, and would often avoid her when they were in shared spaces.

Dom's comment from the afternoon flooded Fern's consciousness in an instant. Fern cleared her throat, suddenly nervous.

"Elliebean, quick question," said Fern, wiping her sweat-soggy palms on the front of her pants, "do you, uh, have feelings for Will?"

Lines appeared in El's brow. "Feelings?"

"Okay, um—what is Will to you?" Fern wanted to roll her eyes at herself and her tiresome idiomatic expressions. "Is he a friend? Or something else?"

"He's..." El was obviously trying to settle for a word, "...a friend's friend."

"Oh." Fern wasn't expecting that. It still wasn't the answer she was looking for. And why was she so embarrassed talking about this? It wasn't like she was educating El about the birds and the bees—or was it?

"I was just wondering..." Fern suddenly remembered the conversation she'd had with El months earlier, when she was cutting El's hair, and she realised how she had to phrase her question.

"El, do you like Will... not like a friend?"

El froze, her eyes turning wide.

"I mean, it's okay if you do, you know? It's natural to have - to have these feelings. For a boy, I mean. Unless you're like me and happen to not like boys—wait, no, what I mean is: I like boys, like how I like Uncle Dom, but not in the other way, the not-like-a-friend way..." Fern trailed off as she caught El squinting at her, trying to make sense of her rampant monologue.

Fern gave a weak laugh. "Do you like Will that way?"

"No," said El, not missing a beat.

Fern didn't know why she was feeling so relieved. All these new-parent feelings were constantly throwing her into the deep end.

"So Will is...?"

"He's important. To my friend." El shrugged. "But I don't like him in that way you said."

"Okay." Fern paused. "Because for a moment there I thought you wanted to talk to him about it. You know, when you said you have something to say to him tomorrow."

"It's about... something else." There was a flicker in El's countenance.

"What is it?"

El shrugged again.

It was all far too mysterious, but Fern knew better than to probe, since at this point they weren't exactly keeping life-changing secrets from each other; El would've told her if she'd been comfortable enough to. Fern would just have to find out in time to come.

"I'll make sure you get to talk to him," promised Fern. "I'll ask Joyce first thing in the morning."

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El had to fast from the night before, so Fern didn't want to move her around unnecessarily; instead, she asked Joyce if the Byerses would allow her and El into their room, which was just a few doors down the hall. Joyce very kindly agreed, and that was how Fern found herself in Joyce's room once again, this time with both El and Will present.

She could sense how this meeting was momentous for El; there was a disquietude in her demeanour, yet her gaze was galvanised with resolve. What could this be about?

"Will," started El, moving closer to the boy, "listen to me."

Will finally tore his eyes off the rug under his feet to look at El. “Are you sure you want to do this? They’ll cut into your brain.” There was a defiance in Will’s whisper, making Joyce shoot an anxious look at Fern.

The El from three months ago might have cowered at the interruption, but the El today was unfazed.

“Yes,” she said, putting out a hand to touch Will on the shoulder.

Will didn’t grimace, he didn’t flinch. He just stared at El, completely inscrutable.

“I want to do this for you,” said El quietly. “Mike would have. Dustin and Lucas too. You know that.”

At this, Will’s impassiveness thawed, his features softening. He still didn’t say anything, but El had definitely gotten through.

El took a deep breath. “And I hope you can do something for Mike.”

The room stilled.

“Don’t let him find me,” said El, looking Will straight in the eye. “He looked for you; if he knows I’m alive, he will look for me too.” The muscles in El’s jaw flexed as she clamped down on her tears. “I won’t remember him when I wake up, so make him understand it was... It was really goodbye.”

Will looked stupefied.

“I know you may not forgive me, not ever,” El went on, “but please—do this for Mike.”

Fern bit down on a gasp of realisation. It all made sense now: El had said she wanted to talk to Will about ‘something’, but it wasn’t *something*—it was *someone*. Dom had been right about it El’s endeavour being spurred by love, except it was love for another boy.

The seconds stretched out, but Will only sighed and looked away. El frowned, not being able to read this, and her hand slipped off his shoulder as she turned to approach Joyce.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be honest with you about where Will was.” El’s voice cracked. “I’m sorry.”

Joyce shook her head, lower lip trembling. She grabbed El’s hands. “Remember that night we first met?”

El met Joyce’s eyes. She nodded.

“Everything I told you that night is still true—you are a very brave girl. And again—thank you for doing this for Will.” Joyce swiped at her nose with her sleeve. “I know you didn’t mean to keep it from us that you knew where he was. I think,” Joyce looked at Will apologetically, “what matters is that you tried your best to get him back.”

At this, El broke down into sobs; Fern took this as her cue to lead El back to her side. Will was looking torn; he seemed to be at a loss for words.

“I’m sorry, Will,” said El at last. “I’m really sorry.”

Will looked at his shoes, ears red, unable to respond.

“Come on,” said Fern gently, taking El’s hand and making for the door. She thanked Joyce and Will before nudging El out into the hallway. Fern turned to shut the door.

“See you guys later,” said Fern, putting on her bravest smile, knowing that ‘later’ meant the operating theatre, and this could very well be the last time El would ever remember them, or speak to them.

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El stared, unmoving, at the hospital gown Fern was holding out to her.

“Baby?” prompted Fern, wagging the piece of clothing. “You’ve got to put this on.”

El snapped out of her thoughts and looked at Fern, before casting her eyes upon the garment yet again.

“You okay, honey?”

El swallowed and nodded. “I’m okay.”

Fern helped her put on the gown, fastening the ties at the back.

This was it: the moment they’d been preparing El for, right from the day she elected to decommission her powers. She knew she was going to wake up with an altered memory, that she was in for months of rehabilitation and therapy; she was going to have her thoughts restructured, her innocence rebuilt. She was also going to have a family and a home, and was to be provided and cared for as long as Fern lived.

Fern failed to knot the last tie; she crumpled onto the floor, heaving sobs.

“Mom.” El put her hand on Fern’s shoulder, worry creasing her brow. “What’s wrong?”

Fern gathered El into her arms and rocked her, crying into her hair. “Oh god,” Fern tipped her head back to take a gasp of air, “this suddenly feels like the worst thing to do to you. I’m going to let them open up your head and take away your memories—what is wrong with me?”

El reached out to brush the tears off Fern’s cheeks.

“You’re not going to remember, El. This *you*—we’ll have to say goodbye to you.” More tears fell on Fern’s lap. “You’re kind, brave, smart, giving—and I’m going to lose you. *You’re* going to lose you. This doesn’t feel right. I don’t want you to do this.”

For a moment, El looked as scared as Fern was, but she drew back the hand that was on Fern’s cheek and looked down at the tattoo of the numeral which gave her her name.

“It’s okay, Mom. I’ll be okay. I’ll be gone just a little while,” said El softly. “And then I’ll wake up better.” Her eyes misted up, but a corner of her lips lifted in a smile. “You’ll be there, right?”

“I’ll be there,” said Fern, struggling against a fresh wave of tears.

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

“This isn’t goodbye.” El intertwined her fingers with Fern’s. “Not this time.”

Fern nodded, righting her thoughts. “You’re going to be in here, somewhere,” Fern kissed El’s forehead, “and I’m going to find you. It’s not goodbye.”

“Not goodbye,” El repeated, falling into Fern’s embrace, and they stayed like that, in each other’s arms, until there was a knock on the door, and the doctors filed in to get El ready for surgery.

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“Here, to temper your temper,” said Dom as he handed Fern a coffee. She took it with a murmur of thanks, not commenting on the silliness of his pun (she knew he was just trying to lighten the mood), before returning her stare to the screen.

El’s second operation was underway (the first being the minor surgery to remove her tattoo); Fern was seated in front of a multi-monitor setup that showed how the surgery was progressing. One of the screens also showed Will, hooked up to several machines—scanners and sensors, the doctors called it—and he was conscious, with Joyce by his side.

“Are they in the same OR?” asked Dom, pointing at Will’s screen.

“Adjacent ones, I think,” replied Fern, blowing on her coffee to cool it.

Dom looked at the screen that showed Will, lips pursing. “Who’s Mike?”

Fern swallowed and replied: “I think it’s Karen Wheeler’s son.”

They were both silent for a moment.

“You heard it too, didn’t you?” said Fern, and Dom nodded.

It’d been El’s last words before she’d been put under. It’d been barely a whisper, but one of the microphones had been near enough to broadcast the unmistakable farewell of ‘goodbye, Mike’.

“It’s really obvious now.” Fern sighed. “Based on what she told Will before the surgery, and what I’ve heard from her and Joyce and Hop, I have this feeling she and the Wheeler kid actually had a thing.”

Fern and Dom stared at each other.

“You don’t think they...” Fern trailed off.

“Ew, Fern,” Dom made a face, “they’re just kids.”

“Right.” Fern frowned, shaking her head to clear it. “Damn this new mom thing.”

There was a knock on the door, and Fern turned to see one of the Duffers poke his head past the jamb.

“Oh, hi. Which one are you?” asked Dom.

“Matt.” Matt grinned.

“Where’s Ross?”

“He’s busy with another project, but he said he’ll come visit in an hour.” He turned to Fern. “Hey, how’s El doing?”

“Okay, I guess,” said Fern. “They’ve located the spots they want to inject the serum into and are going to perform the administration any second.”

Matt then looked at Fern through half-lidded eyes. “You know, under normal circumstances you wouldn’t actually be allowed to watch this.”

“Speak for yourself. You’re not a doctor.”

“Yeah, but I’m not the mom of the person who’s being operated on.”



“Guys,” Dom interrupted, “I think they’re administering the serum right now.” He pointed to one of the monitors.

“Oh God,” mumbled Fern, clutching at Dom and pitting her face into his arm. “This is awful.”

“Hey,” soothed Dom, “she’ll be okay.”

From the corner of her eye Fern watched Shawn, who was leading the surgery, insert a syringe into El’s head.

It seemed like a dozen tubes were coming out of El; over the speakers Fern could hear the hum and beeps of the medical equipment. Fern closed her eyes and prayed; praying and hoping were the only things she could do right now.

“Will looks okay too,” murmured Matt, taking a seat beside Fern.

“How does it work again?” asked Dom, looking to Matt. “His connection to El, I mean.”

“Well, the gunk inside of Will is imaged by this thing over here,” Matt tapped on the screen, indicating the device that was used to detect the organisms inside of Will. “The guys in El’s room receive data on a machine, and also through the intercom that allows the doctors in both ORs to communicate.”

“*Give us a clearer reading, Jefferson,*” said Shawn, and a man in Will’s OR lowered an arm-like apparatus that was hanging above Will closer to his chest.

Matt went on: “The idea is to use Will as a gauge to see how successful we’re getting with El; the less radioactive Will is, the more we know we’re doing the right stuff to El’s brain, because it means the connection is getting cut and she’s closing up the nether.”

“Intriguing,” said Dom, shaking his head in amazement.

A series of beeps sounded, making Fern snap into an upright position.

“What’s going on?” she asked sharply, as the doctors in El’s OR started moving a lot faster than they’d been.

*"BP's dropping,"* said one of the nurses, his voice muffled by his surgical mask.

*"What's happening?"* Will was asking from his room.

*"It's her heart, it's failing—"* someone from the other room said before wheeling a defibrillator cart closer to El.

*"She's supposed to be able to take this!"* said Shawn in frustration.

*"Is she okay?"* Will struggled to sit up, angling his head towards the intercom. *"Eleven!"*

*"Will, you have to stay still—somebody cut the audio feed!"*

Fern froze in horror as the speakers transmitted a blur of peaking voices, the people on the screens rushing to salvage the cataclysm unfolding on their operating table.

Fern let out a cry of outrage as Dom switched off the row of TVs showing El's OR; Matt caught on and quickly turned off the one nearest to him, the one which showed Will's.

*"You can't watch this, Fern,"* said Dom shakily, but Fern had already turned heel and flown out of the door. The men gave chase.

*"You can't do anything now, Fern. Don't go,"* Matt tried persuading, grabbing Fern's arm.

Fern wrenched her arm out of Matt's grip and kept on running down the hallway; as she approached the elevator, its doors parted, and Ross stepped out.

*"Whoa, Fern, what the—"* said Ross as Fern bolted into the elevator and punched the button for the operating floor; a moment later, skimming the narrowing gap of the closing doors, Dom came in.

He looked at Fern, short of breath, chest heaving.

*"No matter what happens, Fern—"*

*"Don't,"* she held up a hand, turning away from him, *"please, not*

now.”

It took mere seconds, but the ride in the elevator felt like an eternity. Fern saw the same image over and over again in her head—El, helpless and cold and lying on that table, the machines beeping around her.

Fern bit down on her lip as she felt the tears fall. She did this. This was all on her.

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It wasn't an intensive care unit, but it was still clinical and nothing like the room they'd shared; Fern drew back the curtains to let in some sunshine, a part of her wildly hoping it'd be bright enough to wake El up.

The doctors had managed to save El, and for all the agony she'd been put through the surgery was a success; but she'd slipped into a coma, and it'd been five days. Still she showed no sign of rousing.

Dom had gone to get Fern some lunch, and the Duffers and Shawn had dropped by earlier to check on El. Shawn had said that her condition was stable, and they were just waiting for her to come to. The odds were in their favour, Shawn had said, and Fern wanted to believe it.

There was a knock on the door, and Fern turned to see Will standing there, looking tired and timid.

Fern hadn't seen Will since... the day of El's surgery, when she watched him on the monitors. She mustered a smile.

“Hi, Will.”

Will stayed rooted to the spot. He was alone, and Fern wondered if Joyce knew he was here.

“We're leaving today,” said Will, barely loud enough for Fern to hear.

Fern nodded; she'd been told.

Will inhaled deeply, shoulders heaving. “May I - may I come in?”

“Sure.” Fern knew Will was concerned; she’d seen how anxious he had been over El’s complications during the surgery, demanding from his own room to know if El was all right.

Will made it to the side of El’s bed, and Fern watched him. His lower lip was trembling; he was trying his best not to cry. “I’m sorry,” said Will despondently, looking up at Fern. “I should have accepted her apology. We should’ve been friends.”

Fern didn’t say anything; she squeezed Will’s shoulder comfortingly.

Will gingerly put out a hand to touch El’s arm. “I promise, Eleven. I won’t let Mike look for you.” Will wiped away tears as his voice broke. “I’m not gonna do it just for Mike—it’s for you, too. Thank you for saving my life. Twice.”

Will then looked up at Fern. “Can you tell her for me? After she wakes up?”

Fern blinked back her own tears. “Oh, honey. She won’t remember.” Will looked shattered. “But thank you for forgiving her,” said Fern, meaning it. “It means a lot.”

Will shook his head vehemently, dragging the back of his hand across his eyes. “I’m sorry, Miss Thayer. After everything you’ve done for me... After everything the both of you have done for me...” He turned his head back to El. “I’m really sorry.”

“Hey,” Fern nudged Will, “no blaming, okay? With a bit of faith, she’ll wake up. And perhaps if you believe that too, she’ll wake up sooner.”

Will nodded, giving Fern a tiny smile. “That’s what my mom says too. Will you let us know when she does?”

Fern hummed. “It’s not impossible, but it won’t be easy. She’s kind of a national secret. So are you, in fact, but the country already knows you came back from the dead.”

Will looked caught, probably unsure if he was allowed to laugh. Fern

was amused she could find it within herself to make a joke at a time like this, but it lent her courage: it was horrible to see El like this, but Fern wouldn't let it damage her spirit. It was the last thing El would need.

El would wake up, and they would have a whole new set of hurdles to overcome together, the way they'd planned it all along.

"I have to go, Miss Thayer," said Will, taking a look at the clock.

Fern nodded. "Later, Will. Perhaps we could find a way to notify you when she wakes up?"

Will made it to the door, then spun on his heel. "Maybe... Well, I *hope*... we'll see each other again."

Fern smiled.

"You and me both, Will."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

So the network dropped the newest trailer and I was like: "NOOO THAT LOOKS A LOT LIKE MY IDEA! But still different" and I decided I had to post to celebrate/prove my fan theory lol. Anyway, I'm not gonna apologise for the wait because dude I TOLD you guys I was going to post in a cluster of three fics and everything was going to come together and yeah if you've been following me on tumblr you'd see the absolute anguish I've been through with this fic the past few months. Unfortunately for those of you who've been waiting, the Mike chapter is in-progress. I'm pretty sure I won't stray too far from Chapter 16 and 17 now, though, so I'm fine with putting up the El and Fern bits first. The worst is over for this fic (this chapter was such a bitch to write...) and I don't expect another long wait for the next instalment. Peace, and congrats to you and me for all the amazing things we've been getting from Season 2 lately!